

The Deinstitutionalization (?) of the House of Representatives:
Reflections on Nelson Polsby's "Institutionalization of the House of Representatives" at Fifty

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Abstract

This paper revisits Nelson Polsby's classic article "The Institutionalization of the House of Representatives" nearly fifty years after its publication, in order to examine whether the empirical trends that Polsby identified have continued. This empirical exploration allows us to place Polsby's findings in broader historical context and to assess whether the House has continued along the "institutionalization course" — using metrics that quantify the degree to which the House has erected impermeable boundaries with other institutions, created a complex institution, and adopted universalistic decisionmaking criteria. Empirically we document that careerism bottomed-out right at the point Polsby wrote "Institutionalization," and that the extension of the careerism trend has affected Democrats more than Republicans. The House remains complex, but lateral movement between the committee and party leadership systems began to re-establish itself a decade after Institutionalization was published. Finally, the seniority system as a mechanism for selecting committee chairs — the primary measure of universalistic decisionmaking criteria — has been almost thoroughly demolished. Thus, most of the trends Polsby identified have moderated, but have not been overturned. We conclude by considering the larger set of interpretive issues that our empirical investigation poses.

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Nearly half a century ago, Nelson Polsby authored three works that together constitute one of the most influential empirical and normative statements about the role of the U.S. House of Representatives in the American political system (Polsby 1968; Polsby, Gallaher, and Rundquist 1969; Polsby 1975). These works — two articles in the *American Political Science Review* and an essay in the *Handbook of Political Science* — took a comparative perspective that spanned both time¹ and space. In this paper we revisit one of those works, Polsby's article on "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," (hereinafter "Institutionalization") with two goals in mind. First, and most simply, we extend Polsby's historical analysis to the present and assess, on its own terms, the degree to which the House has continued along the path of institutionalization that Polsby documented. Second, and more ambitiously, we use Polsby's article as a foil against which we consider how to assess Polsby's larger normative claims, in light of the trajectory of congressional scholarship since the late 1960s and more recent concerns about congressional "dysfunction."

The original title of this paper was cast as a positive assertion that the institutionalization that Polsby documented has come undone, but as we have come to write the paper and consider the evidence, a question mark has snuck into the title. On the surface, there is plenty to suggest

¹ As an aside, a related way to think about the anniversary of Polsby's articles is in terms of the cloudburst of early articles about the history of Congress that appeared about this time and have continued to influence the field to this day. In addition to Polsby's two *APSR* articles, the other seminal articles that bear reflection after half a century are Abram and Cooper (1968) and Price (1975). One could add to this Young's (1966) book on the Washington Community, which was ably reconsidered by Minozzi and Caldeira (2015) at last year's Congress and History conference.

that recent congressional activity has reflected a deinstitutionalization of the House as Polsby considered it — pathways to party leadership have become more porous, previously automatic systems (such as seniority) have been undermined, staff and budgetary support for committees have diminished, and loyalty to the body itself has waned. Yet, as we shall show, when we simply revisit Polsby's measures of institutionalization and continue them to the present, many of the trends that Polsby analyzed have continued unabated, or at least have not reversed course. (There are notable exceptions, of course.) Objectively, the House may be less institutionalized (as Polsby defined it), but it is still highly institutionalized compared to its own history and, presumably, compared to other national legislatures.

Polsby's empirical investigation had a strong normative component that was attuned to the different ways in which legislatures function, even in open democracies such as Western Europe. This larger perspective is especially clear when *Institutionalization* is read alongside his essay "Legislatures," published in the *Handbook of Political Science*.² In that later essay, Polsby suggests a continuum of legislature types, arranged with "transformative" legislatures at one end and "arenas" at the other. The U.S. Congress (and presumably the House in particular) is used as the example of a "highly transformative" legislature. In Polsby's words,

At one end lie legislatures that possess the independent capacity, frequently exercised, to mold and transform proposals from whatever source into laws. The act of transformation is crucial because it postulates a significance to the internal structure of legislatures, to the internal division of labor, and to the policy preferences of various legislators. Accounting for legislative outputs means having to know not merely who proposed what to the legislature and how imperatively but also who processed what *within* the legislature, how enthusiastically — and how competently. (Polsby 1975, p. 277)

² Polsby's formulation of institutionalization in the *Institutionalization* article appears in the *Legislatures* essay at p. 289, as he skeptically considers the role that the System of 1896 played in kicking off the rise of institutionalization in the U.S. House.

The British and Belgian Parliaments and the legislature under the French Fifth Republic are used as examples of the pure arena type. Again in Polsby's words,

Arenas in specialized, open regimes serve as formalized settings for the interplay of significant political forces in the life of a political system: the more open the regime, the more varied and the more representative and accountable the forces that find a welcome in the arena. . . . The existence of legislative arenas leaves unanswered the question of whether the power actually resides that expresses itself in legislative acts — whether (as is palpably the case in many modern democratic systems) in the party system, or the economic stratification system, the bureaucracy attached to the king, the barons and clergy, or wherever (Polsby 1975, pp. 277–278)

This interplay of the concept of institutionalization that appears in Polsby's 1968 article with the classification of legislatures along the transformative–arena continuum in the 1975 essay raises important questions about how we understand legislative activity in the contemporary Congress. It is clear that half a century ago the important legislative enactments of the era bore the mark of the congressional apparatus, and it is not a great leap to assume that the particularities of the internal structure of the House allowed for the enthusiastic — and competent — disposal of executive proposals by Congress. If we look at today's gridlock and dysfunction through a Polsbian eye, we are prompted to consider the possibility that, first, the House is transitioning to arena status and, second, that it is at the same time shedding itself of the institutional features that supported legislative transformation in the middle Twentieth Century.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly review the larger argument made in *Institutionalization* and place the article within the larger context of the evolution of congressional scholarship. Second, we proceed empirically in parallel with *Institutionalization*, updating Polsby's measures of the establishment of boundaries, the growth of internal complexity, and the rise of particularistic criteria and automatic decisionmaking. Third, we conclude by reflecting on the relevance of Polsby's conceptualization of the link

between institutional features and institutional capacity, in light of both intellectual and institutional history over the past half century.

I. Institutionalization Revisited

To understand Polsby's institutionalization argument, one must first have a sense of the American politics literature at the time in which he was writing. During the mid-1960s, the "behavioral revolution" was in full swing. The dominant approach — dubbed the Michigan School — involved applying social-psychological models to the study of individual behavior (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960). While Michigan School advocates contributed to the study of congressional behavior (Miller and Stokes 1963; Kingdon 1973), their major influence came in the areas of public opinion, mass political behavior, and political psychology. An older, sociological approach — dubbed the Columbia School — was still the central means of studying congressional organization (Truman 1959; Matthews 1960; Huitt 1961; Fenno 1966; Huitt and Peabody 1969). Such work "brought the internal structure and culture of Congress to the top of the academic agenda" (Polsby 1975, p. 286).³ This literature "abounded in terms like *role*, *norm*, *system*, and *socialization*" (Mayhew 1974, p. 1; emphasis in the original).

In writing *Institutionalization*, Polsby was working within a branch of sociology called organization theory.⁴ His goal was to study Congress as a system, particularly how such a legislative organization (1) succeeds in performing its requisite tasks (like resource allocation, problem solving, and conflict settlement) while (2) maintaining itself as a democratic (representative) locale that allows movement in and out and both legitimates and contains minority opposition. For Polsby, a legislature becomes "institutionalized" when "it has become

³ Polsby (1975, pp. 286–288) attributed this trend specifically to Ralph Huitt's work.

⁴ For an organization theory approach to the emergence and development of the standing committee system in the House, see Cooper (1970).

perceptibly more bounded, more complex, and more universalistic and automatic in its internal decision making” (1968, p. 145). These aspects of an institutionalized legislature, as Polsby applied them to the House of Representatives, will be described in detail below. Importantly, Polsby sought to *operationalize* these aspects in way to make them quantifiable, such that the House as a system could be compared across time.

Polsby’s analysis of the House, and his related time series plots, conclude in the mid-1960s. Updating these data series thus becomes more than a trivial exercise, as important factors and conditions internal and external to the House have changed considerably. The committee-centered House of the Lyndon Johnson administration — wherein committee chairmen largely dictated legislative business, the seniority system was in full flower, and the conservative coalition operated on a range of issues — is no more. Over time, led by the realignment in the South (following the Voting Rights Act of 1965), the parties began to both homogenize and polarize and majority party power in the House grew considerably. As party power increased, committee power waned, and factors important to committee dominance (seniority, budgetary support for committee staff, etc.) diminished accordingly. In addition, loyalty to the system declined in importance, as loyalty to party and to self (revealing an emergence of “individualism”) grew in relation.

While exploring the dynamics of institutionalization over the last fifty years strikes us as both interesting and important, this line of research has been largely neglected by students of Congress. Why is this? Just as Congress was at an inflection point at the time in which Polsby was writing, the *study of Congress* was at a similar inflection point. Sociological and social-psychological approaches, as applied to Congress, were in fact at their zenith in the mid-1960s. Around the same time, economic-based approaches, wherein political actors were viewed as

“purposive” and endowed with “agency” in a way that did not exist in behavioral studies to that point, were beginning to take hold in the literature, first in more theoretical (or abstract) ways (Downs 1957; Black 1958; Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Riker 1962; Olson 1965). In short order, these economic-based (or “rational choice”) approaches were applied directly to substantive research areas — with the study of Congress being an early target (Manley 1970; Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). Key here, perhaps, was the transition of two important scholars, Richard Fenno and David Mayhew, who followed up two largely sociological-based analyses (*The Power of the Purse* [1966] and *Party Loyalty among Congressmen* [1966], respectively) with two rational-choice-based analyses (*Congressmen in Committees* [1973] and *Congress: The Electoral Connection* [1974], respectively). Fenno (1973) and Mayhew (1974) became foundational works in the rational-choice study of Congress, and the literature today is still dominated by the rational-choice approach. As a result, political-sociology, of the type pursued by Polsby, has fallen into disuse.

Returning to Institutionalization, Polsby situated his analysis of the House in the structural-functionalism of the day. He began by noting that students of politics were in agreement about two things:

First, we agree that for a political system to be viable . . . it must be institutionalized. That is to say, organizations must be created and sustained that are specialized to political activity. . . . Secondly, it is generally agreed that for a political system to be in some sense free and democratic, means must be found for institutionalizing representativeness with all the diversity that this implies, and for legitimizing yet at the same time containing political opposition within the system. (Polsby 1968, p. 144)

Failing institutionalization, “the political system is likely to be unstable, weak, and incapable of servicing the demands or protecting the interests of its constituent groups.” (Ibid.) The House was an apt place to investigate institutionalization in a modern, open polity because it was “one

of the very few extant examples of a highly specialized political institution which over the long run has succeeded in representing a large number of diverse constituents, and in legitimizing, expressing, and containing political opposition within a complex political system. . . .” (Ibid.)

To make the idea of institutionalization operational, Polsby proposed that an institutionalized organization has three characteristics:

1) [I]t is relatively well-bounded, that is to say, differentiated from its environment. Its members are easily identifiable, it is relatively difficult to become a member, and its leaders are recruited principally from within the organization. 2) The organization is relatively complex, that is, its functions are internally separated on some regular and explicit basis, its parts are not wholly interchangeable, and for at least some important purposes, its parts are interdependent. There is a division of labor in which roles are specified, and there are widely shared expectations about the performance of roles. There are regularized patterns of recruitment to roles, and of movement from role to role. 3) Finally, the organization tends to use universalistic rather than particularistic criteria, and automatic rather than discretionary methods for conducting its internal business. Precedents and rules are followed; merit systems replace favoritism and nepotism; and impersonal codes supplant personal preferences as prescriptions for behavior. (p. 145)

For the remainder of this paper we take these markers of institutionalization as given, but we also note in passing that one could imagine other ways to parse an organization. The rational choice literature reviewed above, for instance, has one of its feet in the new economics of organization, and one could imagine other metrics that could be derived from that literature to study the House’s institutional capacity over time.⁵ For the moment, however, we hew to the path blazed by Polsby.

II. Revisiting Metrics of Institutionalization

Polsby structured his discussion of the institutionalization of the House along the three markers delineated above — the establishment of boundaries, the complexity of organization, and the use

⁵ One place to start along this path would be, for instance, Gilligan and Krehbiel’s work on informative legislatures (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1989, 1990; Krehbiel 1991).

of universalistic decision criteria. In this section we review these measures, first, by updating them. In all cases we have extended the time series he analyzed; in some cases we have corrected (or confirmed) his analysis through the use of data that have been assembled more recently. Next, in the discussion of how history and the institutional contours of the House have unfolded since the 1960s, we find it necessary to augment further the data that Polsby presented, in order to fill out the story to the present.

The Establishment of Boundaries

The first mark of the institutionalization of the House from Polsby's perspective was the establishment of boundaries, that is, "the differentiation of an organization of its environment" (Polsby 1968, p. 145). Polsby operationalized the establishment of boundaries in terms of the channeling of careers. First, among the rank-and-file, institutionalization was indicated by the degree to which it was difficult to enter the House and easy, once elected, to remain elected.⁶ Second, institutionalization was also measured by the degree to which a long apprenticeship was served before ascending to party leadership (particularly the Speakership), and the degree to which the Speakership was the end of a long and distinguished political career.

The growth of House careers. Polsby began by noting that across the great sweep of American history, House membership turnover had generally declined, to the point that in the first half of the twentieth century the Congress with the greatest turnover (the 73rd [1933], with over 1/3 new members) still was still twice as stable as the typical House in the nineteenth century (Polsby 1968, p. 146).

⁶ In light of the 2016 presidential election currently being played out, it is hard to ignore the observation that the establishment of boundaries in Polsby's terms between the House and other institutions in society may be counter to the House being an effective conduit of popular sentiments into the federal government.

We have updated Polsby's time series showing the percentage of the House that was serving its first term in Table 1 and Figure 1.⁷ The time series showing the average terms of service by members of the House are shown in Table 2 and Figure 2.⁸

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

The figures, which group the data by ten-Congress periods and explicitly compare the data from Institutionalization with the McKibbin/Stewart measures, show that Polsby was writing at almost precisely the moment when membership turnover in the House bottomed-out. Starting with the measure of the percentage of the House that was in its first term (Figure 1 and Table 1), the fraction of the House that was new reached an average of roughly 15% by the 1950s and stayed in that vicinity (with Congress-to-Congress fluctuations) through the 2010s. Figure 1 suggests that the fraction of rookies in each House has crept up a bit in recent elections. Still, the average has yet to return to pre-New Deal levels.

The measure of average terms served by member tells a similar story. (See Figure 2 and Table 2). Like the measure of first-term members, the average terms of service in the House took a significant leap between the 1940s and 1950s (continuing the long-term trend begun around the Civil War), and then plateaued from the 1960s onward. Mean terms of service have

⁷ Table 1 and Figure 1 compare Polsby's time line with data constructed from the McKibbin ICPSR data set (study 7803), updated by the authors. (The membership data may be downloaded from Stewart's congressional data Web site: http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www/data_page.html. We also plot data reported by Fiorina, Rohde and Wissel (1975). The updated data analysis we conducted did not take into account the Fiorina, Rohde, and Wissel critique of Polsby's method of measuring the percentage of House members who were first-term. In particular, they noted that during the period of the greatest membership turnout was also the period of greatest growth in the size of the House of Representatives, both due to population growth and the admission of new states. Therefore, it is incorrect to use as a denominator the total size of the House in each Congress; a correction needs to be made for the new seats added due to admissions and reapportionment. We will make this correction in future drafts.

⁸ It appears that the y-axis in Polsby's Figure 2 is mislabeled. As a comparison of his Figure 2 with the Figure 2 displayed in this paper, it is clear that Polsby's measure of average length of service was expressed in units of terms served rather than years.

continued to creep up since the time Polsby wrote, but the rate of change is significantly less than what Polsby described.

The rise in average terms served, along with the related decline in the percentage of new members, became fodder in the years immediately following Institutionalization for an empirical literature that examined the rise of the “incumbency advantage” (Erikson 1971; Alford and Hibbing 1981; Gelman and King 1990; Cox and Katz 1996; Levitt and Wolfram 1997; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2000) and a related literature that has examined a decline in responsiveness over time that is correlated with the rise of the incumbency advantage (Burnham 1975; King and Gelman 1991; Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992). Of course, the literature that documents a decline in responsiveness provides an alternative normative perspective on the existence of boundaries between the House and other American institutions. While it may have been the case that the persistence of long careers in the House after 1968 helped contribute to an institutionalized House, scholars such as Fiorina (1977) suggested that the lengthening of careers may have coincided with a rise in rent-seeking among members of Congress, which benefitted the members themselves more than their constituents.

An important contextual change since the publication of Institutionalization is that the House is no longer presumptively controlled by Democrats. In the year that Institutionalization was published, the House had been controlled by Democrats for 34 of 38 years; after its publication, it would continue to be controlled by Democrats for 26 additional years. Because the most coveted positions of power (the Speakership and committee chairs) were doled out solely to Democrats, Democrats had an incentive to work hard to secure reelection.

The presumption of Democratic control of the House has changed, of course. Since 1994 the House has been controlled by Republicans for all but six years. Across the 48 years since the

publication of *Institutionalization*, the House has been controlled by Democrats for 32 of those years and Republicans for 16.

A different (but perhaps just as important) contextual change is the realignment of the political parties since the 1960s into two camps that are more ideologically coherent than when Polsby was writing. At the time of *Institutionalization*'s publication, the Republican Party had come to terms with the larger role for the federal government ushered in by the New Deal. And even small-government champions of Main Street within the GOP could pursue federal spending for their own districts without facing charges of hypocrisy.

Putting this all together, it is easy to see that House members from both parties had reasons to seek long careers in the House when Polsby was writing in 1968. Since then, things have changed. Most importantly, the realignment of the parties means that Republican House members cannot easily rest their reelection hopes on taking credit for their prowess in bringing home the bacon. Furthermore, a disdain of government has driven many Republican office holders to eschew the life of a career politician and to impose term limits on themselves.

The shifting partisan tides since the late 1960s suggests that the career trajectories that Polsby examined in 1968 may have taken different paths since then. We find that this is in fact true.

In Figures 3 and 4 we take the data displayed in Figures 1 and 2 and divide the time series by parties beginning with the 37th Congress (1861). Because it is difficult to discern the divergence of time series in the mid-twentieth century using raw data — especially the time series showing the percentage of members serving their first term — we also display the same time series using lowess smoothing.

[Figures 3 and 4 about here]

The lowess graph in Figure 3 shows that Republicans always had a slightly greater share of rookie members than Democrats throughout the twentieth century. However, in the immediate post-War years, this gap began to grow, to the point that in recent years the long-term average Republican contingent in the House has been about 20% new members, while the average Democratic contingent has been about 15%.

These differences, while seemingly small, have compounded over time.⁹ The effect of this compounding is shown in Figure 4, where both the raw data and the lowess fit show a clear break around the 82nd Congress (1951). From then onwards, the long-term average terms of service among Republicans has drifted up only somewhat, whereas there are two periods in which the average number of terms served among Democrats has surged. These days, the average Democrat will serve about a term-and-a-half longer in the House than the average Republican; at the time Institutionalization was written, the difference was about a term, but the gap between the two parties had only just begun to open up.

To the degree that long House careers are a marker of an institutionalized House, we can suggest an amendment to Polsby's insights that pertains to party. It is certainly true that the long rise of careerism that Polsby (and others) documented applied to both Democrats and Republicans (Young 1966; Price 1971; Bullock 1972; Fiorina et al 1975; Kernell 1977; Cover 1983; Katz and Sala 1996; Brady, Buckley, and Rivers 1999; Palmer and Simon 2003; Engstrom and Kernell 2005). However, even in the 1960s, Democrats were more likely to regard the

⁹ A back-of-the-envelope calculation shows how quickly these difference can compound. The percentages in the previous paragraph are consistent with 80% of Republicans and 85% of Democrats being returned each Congress to the next. We can calculate the "half-life" of each party caucus in each Congress by solving for t in the equation $p^t = .5$, where p equals the return rate. With an 80% return rate, the half-life of the Republicans in one Congress is 3.11 terms; with an 85% return rate, the half-life of the Democrats in one Congress is 4.27 terms. This calculation, of course, is no more than a heuristic, since it assumes that members return from one Congress to the next randomly, based solely on the return-rate probability. The calculation is nonetheless valuable for making the point.

House as a place to stay than Republicans. While this may be an artifact of the lack of two-party competition in the South, as Figure 5 illustrates, this was only part of the picture.

[Figure 5 about here]

At the time Polsby was writing, the differences in career patterns among members of the “three parties” of the House — northern Democrats, southern Democrats, and Republicans — were well in evidence. (To assist in illustrating this point, the dashed vertical lines in Figure 5 are drawn right after the 89th Congress [1965], which was the cutoff for the career data reported in *Institutionalization*.) Starting with Reconstruction and moving into the 1950s, the average career lengths of all three party contingents grew secularly, with the rate of growth among southern Democrats outpacing the other two for most of this period. The growth in the length of Republican House careers leveled off around 1950 (as discussed above), but the career lengths of southern Democrats peaked almost precisely at the time *Institutionalization* was being written. Following a period in which the average career length of southern Democrats collapsed, more recently the length-of-service of southern Democrats has re-joined the upward march of northern Democrats.

The implications of this partisan divergence in career paths seem obvious as we consider the fate of House institutionalization over the past half-century. Right as Polsby was writing, the Rube Goldbergian shift in the coalitions making up the parties was beginning to shift. These shifts not only unified yielded two ideologically unified parties, but produced party contingents that had different attitudes toward the House as a place to make a political career. The Democrats — the party of an activist federal government — continued to regard the House as a place to come and stay awhile. The Republicans — the party increasingly skeptical of most federal government activity, even activity that had previously been conceived of in bipartisan

terms — increasingly regarded House service as a necessary nuisance, endurable for only so long. Thus, if we take seriously the larger intellectual argument that framed Polsby's analysis, it wouldn't surprise us that institutionalization itself would become a partisan issue.

Leadership recruitment: The careers of Speakers. If one measure of institutionalization was the degree to which rank-and-file members regard membership in the House as a career unto itself, then a related measure would be the degree to which leadership in the House was integrated into that career as a special track. Adapting the mid-twentieth-century corporate view that the path of effective organizational leadership was most likely to resemble that of a ladder, Polsby contrasted the leadership path of the most peripatetic of nineteenth century House leaders, Henry Clay, with that of typical leaders in the twentieth century.

Just as the career paths of House members were about to take a turn when Polsby published *Institutionalization*, the career paths of leaders were about to take a turn, as well. We illustrate this by first updating the measures that Polsby presented.

We begin with the path to the speakership itself. At the time *Institutionalization* was being written, the career path of party leaders, especially on the Democratic side, was becoming increasingly predictable and differentiated from the committee leadership track.¹⁰ This was illustrated, first, by the years of service by Speakers before they ascended to the speakership. We have updated Polsby's Tables 3 and 4, along with Figure 3, to reflect the new Speakers who were elected after 1968. (The first new Speaker after *Institutionalization* was, appropriately enough for a conference hosted by the Carl Albert Center, Carl Albert.) These new tables and figures are Table 3, Table 4, and Figure 6.

[Tables 3 and 4 about here]

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, this latter trend, the separation of committee and party leadership tracks, should be considered a marker of the growing institutional complexity of the House and a more finely delineated division-of-labor.

[Figure 6 about here]

Focusing our attention on Figure 6, Institutionalization was being written at the end of a long period in which the years of preparation for the speakership grew steadily each generation. In this regard, the growing institutional experience of Speakers paralleled the growing institutional experience of the rank-and-file. However, as with the rank-and-file membership trend, the growth in years of prior experience before being elected Speaker stopped almost immediately and (unlike the rank-and-file trend) returned to earth following the publication of Institutionalization.

Two trends conspired to bring the prior service of new Speakers down to a level last seen a century ago. The first was the coming volatility of the tenure of Speakers. Of the nine Speakers elected since 1968 (Albert to Ryan), at least four left office due to factors that were anything but routine.¹¹ Jim Wright (D-Tex.) left under the cloud of an ethics investigation that itself was stoked by the heightened degree of partisanship that he had interjected into the job. His successor, Thomas Foley (D-Wash.) in 1994 became the first Speaker defeated for reelection since the Civil War. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) resigned in 1998, taking responsibility for the midterm drubbing of his party that year. The more recent travails of John Boehner (R-Ohio) are well-known. The fates of these four Speakers resulted in speakerships that were unusually short. Three of these — Wright, Gingrich, and Boehner — were rare cases of Speakers stepping down without party control of the House changing hands. Regardless of the source of the turnover, the practical fact is that the parties had to go to their “bench” more quickly than they had anticipated, driving down the prior experience of Speakers elected from the 1970s onward.

¹¹ We reserve judgment about the ninth Speaker, Ryan, who has not served long enough for us to know if he escapes the fate of his predecessor.

The second trend, probably related to the first, was a short-circuiting of the leadership track that was developing within the parties, distinct from the committee leadership track. This is illustrated in Table 5, which shows the prior leadership experience of Speakers when they were first selected, starting with Cannon in 1903. From the election of Cannon through the election of Joseph Martin (R-Mass.) as Speaker in 1946, the standard path to the speakership involved leaving a leadership position on one of the top legislative committees and ascending to the leadership of the party.¹² Only two Speakers during this period, Cannon and Gillett, moved directly from committee leadership to the speakership.

[Table 5 about here]

John McCormack, who was Speaker when *Institutionalization* was published, represented a new path to the speakership. Although McCormack served as a member of the Ways and Means Committee the first time he was elected majority leader in 1940, he had only risen to fourth in rank on the committee. McCormack gave up his Ways and Means seat and remained in leadership even when Democrats lost control of the House in the 1948 election, dropping back to minority whip for one Congress. The next three Speakers, Albert, O’Neil, and Wright, similarly ascended to the speakership having never risen to committee leadership.

However, Foley’s ascent to the speakership in 1989 represented a breaking of the party/committee leadership barrier that had arisen with McCormack. Since then all Speakers, with the exception of Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), had previously served as the chair or ranking member of a committee.¹³

¹² By “leadership of the party” we mean moving from the chair of a committee to being majority leader or from ranking member to being minority leader. About the interaction between party and committee leadership from the Civil War to the early twentieth century see Jenkins and Stewart (2013).

¹³ And of course, Hastert is the exception that proves the rule. Hastert became Speaker upon the resignation of Speaker-designate Bob Livingston (R-La.). Livingston, who was chosen to replace Gingrich after he stepped down following the 1998 election, was the chair of the House Appropriations Committee at the time. However, after Livingston secured the nomination of the Republican Conference, it was revealed that he had been involved in

In Polsby's view, time after serving as Speaker was just as important an indicator of the specialization of the position as time spent before becoming Speaker. As he notes (p. 149), in the nineteenth century the speakership was typically just a waystation en route to other positions of influence at the state and national levels. As a consequence, none of the individuals who served as Speaker during the first eighty-six years of the Republic's history died in office, whereas of the ten Speakers who served immediately before the publication of Institutionalization, six had died in office. (The incumbent Speaker, McCormack, died nine years after he stepped down in 1971.)

Table 6 and Figure 7 update Polsby's Table 5 and Figure 4, respectively, show the post-speakership careers of all the individuals who have served in that office. Looking first at Figure 7, the only additional data point added to Polsby's Figure 4 is the final bar which shows that the last ten Speakers to serve have lived an average of 10.1 years after leaving the speakership. (In Institutionalization, this bar was described by the statistics associated with five former Speakers, all of whom had died in office.) Thus, it is clear that the pattern Polsby observed, of Speakers "going out with their boots on," has not become the new normal.

[Table 6 about here]

[Figure 7 about here]

Furthermore, as Table 6 suggests, the speakership may have emerged once again as a waystation en route to greater responsibility, fame, and/or fortune. Starting with Foley, all former Speakers have continued on with careers related at least in part to government activity

several extramarital affairs. This led to Livingston's resignation from the House (and thus the speakership). Hastert, a protégé of Majority Leader Tom Delay (R-Tex.), was chosen instead. Thus, had Livingston never been ensnared in his own sex scandal on the eve of the Clinton impeachment vote, there would have been no exception to the pipeline from committee leadership to the speakership mentioned here. For a succinct summary of the machinations that led to Hastert's nomination as speaker, see Adam Cohen, "The Speaker Who Never Was," <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/time/1998/12/21/livingston.html>.

and attempts to influence national policy debates and outcomes. (The jury is still out on how Boehner will spend what will no doubt be many decades of retirement from the speakership.) As the tawdry matter of Dennis Hastert's post-speakership life has revealed, it is not hard for an ex-Speaker to cash-in as a lobbyist.¹⁴ A less tawdry, but still controversial, example is illustrated by the post-speakership financial success of Newt Gingrich.¹⁵

Taken together, it is difficult to make a case that the speakership has remained as the pinnacle of a leadership system that is specialized to the point precluding lateral movement.¹⁶ Among Republicans especially, there is a degree of permeability that failed to exist in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Whether this permeability has been a contributing factor to the difficulties that leaders have had in corralling their followers, or is simply another indicator of the relatively low esteem in which political leadership is held, is a topic we save for future consideration.

The Growth of Internal Complexity

The section of Institutionalization that is the least quantitative and most impressionistic analyzes the growth of internal complexity. As Polsby notes, simple objective metrics such as the number of committees are insufficient to measure the institutional complexity of the House because they fail to capture the evolving degree to which the House differentiated its functions over time and then assigned various tasks to these differentiated subsystems. Take the committee system as an example. The number of committees is a poor measure of the growth of internal complexity in the House because, first, the rise in the number of committees in the nineteenth century occurred

¹⁴ In 2015 *Politico* provided a detailed glimpse into Hastert's financial dealings:

<http://www.politico.com/story/2015/05/dennis-hastert-how-he-made-income-118414>.

¹⁵ *Forbes* reported in 2011, for instance, that Gingrich had assembled a "\$100 million gaggle of businesses" and an annual income of \$2.5 million. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/petercohan/2011/11/28/newts-100-million-gingrich-industrial-complex-2/#5f7511181d6d>.

¹⁶ In this regard, the current presidential primary season suggests that perhaps the presidency itself is not immune to lateral movement.

in a process that could hardly be called planned; to the degree that motivations could be discerned in the creation of new committees, they were a mix of function, partisan, and particularistic (Canon, Nelson, and Stewart 2002). Second, the decline in the number of House committees, particularly the consolidation induced by the 1946 Legislative Reorganization Act, was generally accompanied by an increase in jurisdictional specificity and rationalization. The decline in the number of committee was also met with an increase in the number of subcommittees, which is just another way of noting that the complexity and internal differentiation of the committee system is consistent with both a large and small number of parent committees.

Polsby never comes out and says it, but one gets a sense that he is avoiding the use of the word “bureaucratization” to describe the long-term trend of House organization leading up to the late 1960s. The two major organizational subsystems of the House, the committee and leadership systems, either had become or were becoming pyramidal. The House rules were becoming more complex, committees were becoming more protective of their jurisdictions, and the paths to leadership were becoming regularized as the leadership system itself expanded and became formally recognized. Of course, there was still much about the House that defied the label “bureaucratization,” particularly the parts that had to account for the formal equality of all members when it came to voting. And, the rules themselves, which could be taken as another marker of institutional complexity, could hardly be called “rational” in the sense used by organization theory, and oftentimes were honored in the breach anyway (King 1997).

To continue along his qualitative path for the moment, Polsby’s discussion of the rise of internal complexity focused on three major topics, the committee system, floor leadership, and internal House management. In the case of the committee system, he identified four phases of

committee development throughout congressional history: Phases I and II, both in the earliest years of the Republic, saw an ad hoc reliance on select committees, with a handful of standing committees thrown in, as the House wrestled with power sharing dynamics of first a Federalist administration (Phase I) and then Jefferson's administration (Phase II). Phase III was ushered in by the speakership of Henry Clay and lasted for a century.¹⁷ It is Phase IV that could be considered the "textbook period" of committee governance, which was ushered in by the revolt against Cannon and the subsequent reshuffling of committee appointment powers from party leaders to the rank-and-file. Polsby described Phase IV as follows:

Under the fourth, decentralized, phase of the committee system, committees have won solid institutionalized independence from party leaders both inside and outside Congress. Their jurisdictions are fixed in the rules; their composition is largely determined and their leadership entirely determined by the automatic operation of seniority. Their work is increasingly technical and specialized, and the way in which they organize internally to do their work is entirely at their own discretion. Committees nowadays have developed an independent sovereignty of their own, subject only to very infrequent reversals and modifications of their powers by House party leaders backed by large and insistent majorities. (p. 156)

In reflecting on the evolution of House committees since 1968, one can see ways in which the tendencies of Phase IV were both reinforced and undermined.¹⁸ Most notably, the Subcommittee Bill of Rights in 1975 extended many of the marks of rationalistic/bureaucratic organization down one level, by mandating fixed jurisdictions and removing membership decisions from the unilateral control of committee chairs. Other reforms, such as the creation of "Speaker discharge" and multiple referral, could be considered efforts to bring greater rationality to a system that had become encrusted with conflicting and dysfunctional rules.

¹⁷ On the common mistake of attributing the rise of the standing committee system to Clay himself, see both Young (1966) and Stewart (2006).

¹⁸ The literature on committees since 1968 is, of course, immense, and includes one of the most influential works in the history of congressional studies, Fenno (1973). For a catalogue of this literature see Nelson and Stewart (2011).

At the same time, an attack on the Phase IV committee system became a central feature of Newt Gingrich's ascent to the speakership in 1995, particularly the rules and informal practices that maintained firewalls between the party leadership and committee systems. Below, we show how one marker of the Phase IV committee regime, seniority, has been thoroughly destroyed. More generally, the blurring of the lines between the committee and party systems has become part-and-parcel of case studies about congressional policymaking in recent years (Stewart 2011; Sinclair 2011).

In summarizing the long sweep of the history of formal party leadership, Polsby noted “a contrast between the practices of recent and earlier years with respect to formal party leaders other than the Speaker:”

(1) Floor leaders in the 20th century are officially designated; in the 19th, they were often informally designated, indefinite, shifting or even competitive, and based on such factors as personal prestige, speaking ability, or Presidential favor. (2) Floor leaders in recent years are separated from the committee system and elected by party members; earlier they were prominent committee chairmen who were given their posts by the Speaker, sometimes as a side-payment in the formation of a coalition to elect the Speaker. (3) Floor leaders today rely upon whip systems; before 1897 there were no formally designated whips. (p. 158)

To a first approximation, much of this summary still applies to the formal party leadership positions in the House. Indeed, in the years immediately following the publication of *Institutionalization*, the trends noted by Polsby in 1968 continued apace. Not only did the formal leadership system continue to be differentiated from the committee system, but it grew and became more complex. The whip systems of both parties grew, both to incorporate party factions into leadership and to facilitate the coordination of co-partisan action. Beyond the whip system, party committees themselves — the steering, policy, and campaign committees — have become more prominent and leadership for the chairs of these committees has become more contested. As Jenkins and Stewart (2013) note, the Republican Party particularly has

rationalized election procedures for the leaders of party organizations, making it much less likely that the party will become hamstrung over fights to control the short term direction of the party.

These developments since 1968 provide further context for the empirical patterns we previously observed about the paths to and from the speakership. If we only look at the Speaker, it appears that House institutionalization has backslid, as far as the party leadership is concerned. If we look at the rest of the organization of parties in the House, however, we see greater development of the organizations that pursue partisan goals. This further suggests that rather than thinking entirely about the *degree* of institutionalization, it is important to consider the *quality* of institutionalization, as well. In other words, it could very well be that the institutionalized features of the House are more party-centric than committee-centric, which is of course entirely consistent with the common observations about the rise of “party government” in Congress.

Finally, Polsby remarked on internal House management, which he noted could be measured in terms of “personnel, facilities, and money” (p. 158). Before the passage of the 1946 Legislative Reorganization Act, the House (and Congress more generally) could not be said to have much of any of these, although the Congress in general, and the House in particular, was not totally devoid of personnel, facilities, and money.¹⁹ The 1946 LRA changed this, of course,

¹⁹ In Jenkins and Stewart (2013), we recount how in the nineteenth century, the House Printer and Clerk controlled significant patronage and spending authority. It is in fact possible to argue that at one point, the House Clerk’s budget was greater than the entire current budget of the House of Representatives, when calculated in real terms. The Printer had a major role in the funding of local newspapers throughout the United States, particularly those with partisan affiliations, who benefitted from the requirement that the laws of Congress be printed in newspapers. These offices were scaled back significantly around the Civil War, but for different reasons. The House and Senate printers’ functions were transferred to the newly created Government Printing Office on the eve of the Civil War, and the House regularly scaled back the appropriation afforded the Clerk in the antebellum period. In addition, the creation of the General Accounting Office in 1909, while not dedicated to the work of the House and kept at arm’s length from Congress through the presidential appointment of the Comptroller General, was also a significant institution that should be credited in part to the House’s pre-1968 institutional capacity.

as is illustrated in Figure 8 and Table 7, which update Polsby's account of appropriations for the House of Representatives up to the mid-1960s.

[Table 7 about here]

[Figure 8 about here]

Figure 8 graphs appropriations for the support of the House of Representatives, show in real (2015) dollars.²⁰ The inflection point after 1946 is clear. The dashed line is drawn right after 1967 and helps us to see that the steady increase in House expenditures continued for about another decade after the publication of *Institutionalization*, before enduring a series of up-and-down years. We have yet to examine in depth the reasons behind the peaks in spending that started regularly occurring in the late 1970s. However, even if we assume all of these peaks are due to short-term projects, it is hard to escape the conclusion that real spending for the House has continued its secular upward climb since the publication of *Institutionalization*.

One period of internal retrenchment that is difficult to see in Figure 8, but is visible in Table 7, is the slight downturn associated with the Republican takeover in 1995. Measured from the local peak in real spending for FY1992 (\$1.283 billion) to the trough in FY 1997 (\$1.116 billion), the House made an immediate 13.1% cut in its own budget during the early Gingrich years. However, from this trough to FY 2015, House spending has rebounded to a level that is 22.5% greater than it was before Gingrich came to office.

A similar story can be told using total personnel levels, a time series not examined by Polsby. These data, displayed in Figure 9, show a rise in House employment into the 1980s. Reaching a peak in the early 1980s, employment in the House began a slow secular decline,

²⁰ The deflator is based on the report of the historical CPI-U series reported on the Web site of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/community/teaching-aids/cpi-calculator-information/consumer-price-index-and-inflation-rates-1913>.

which accelerated only somewhat by the 1995 ascent of the Republicans — the total number of House personnel fell by 2.8%, from 7,390 to 7,186, between FY 1994 and 1995.²¹

[Figure 9 about here]

These spending and employment figures span the entire House, and therefore do not tell the story of how spending has been distributed internally. Thus, they do not provide a precise picture of whether these types of objective measures of institutional capacity can help document a shift in capabilities from the committee system to the leadership (or the individual members). Discerning these shifts using official budgetary documents is tricky, which is reflected in the accounting contained in the estimable *Vital Statistics on Congress* (Ornstein, et al 2013).

Using one set of statistics reported in *Vital Statistics*, the number of staff assisting House committees has grown by 88.6% since Polsby's time (from 571 in 1965 to 1,324 in 2009), while district staff have grown 246% (from 1,035 in 1970 to 3,581 in 2010) and overall House employment has grown 80.8% (from 4,055 in 1967 to 7,330 in 2010).²² There is a notable dip in committee and overall House employment right after 1994, but a simple plateauing of district staff from that time to the present.

Another set of statistics from Ornstein et al (2013, Table 5-1) covers a shorter time period, but allows a glimpse into the shifting of staff within the House over the past generation. Since 1979, the total number of House staff has fallen 17.6%, from 10,743 in 1979 to 8,853 in 2009. The sub-categories of staff experiencing drops include committee staff, at 35.1% (from 2,027 in 1979 to 1,316 in 2011) and staff for officers of the House (Clerk, sergeant at arms, etc.),

²¹ This is *one of the* greatest one-year declines in employment for the period in which the numbers are reported annually, but ranks as only the seventh-greatest one-year drop in House employment between 1977 and 2010.

²² The statistics used here are from Tables 5-2, 5-3, and 5-6 from Ornstein, et al (2013). The different reference years in the text reflect the data available in these tables. The rule for calculating percentage changes was to use the year closest to 1967 as the base and to compare that to the last year of the reported series.

at 68.9% (from 1,487 in 1979 to 463 in 2011). Growing throughout this period has been leadership staff, by 24.7%, from 162 in 1979 to 202 in 2011.

If we focus on the post-Gingrich period, the relative shift in staff from committees to leadership is even more apparent. In this shorter period (1993 to the most recent year with reported data), overall employment levels have fallen 18.6%, with committee staff falling 38.7% and personal staff falling 0.9%, but leadership staff growing by 53.0%.

Within the committee system itself, it appears that the number of staff in each committee is greater than it was in the late 1960s. However, since 1994 the number of staff has fallen significantly across-the-board, with the exceptions of Appropriations, Transportation, and the Judiciary, which have remained essentially flat.²³

Viewing the topic of institutional complexity broadly, we come out pretty much where Polsby did, insofar as the complexity of the House today continues to be in a different league from the complexity of the House in the nineteenth century. However, although the House today seems about as organizationally complex as the House of the 1960s in historical perspective, the locus of that complexity has changed over time. There is no mistaking the fact that the institutional center-of-gravity has shifted from committees toward House party leadership. Whether this has also led to an institutional shift away from the House toward the executive branch and the courts is a matter we can only speculate about at this point. We leave this speculation to the conclusion.

Universalistic and Automated Decisionmaking

Finally, Polsby turned his attention to the shift from particularistic to universalistic and automated decision making in the House. He focused on two important aspects of congressional

²³ The data here are taken from Ornstein et al (2013), Table 5-6. The last year in the series is 2009, and therefore more recent changes in committee staff sizes are not reflected here.

activity. The first was the path to leadership in the committee system; the second was the process of adjudicating contested election cases. About each he stated that the “best evidence we have of a shift away from discretionary and toward automatic decision making is the growth of seniority as a criterion determining committee rank and the growth of the practice of deciding contested elections to the House strictly on the merits.” (p. 160)

About each, he found a profound shift over time away from particularism, toward practices that diffused partisan and ideological tensions. As we shall see, the first mechanism he explored, the committee seniority system, appears to be all-but-dead, at least among Republicans. The second mechanism, contested elections, continues to appear universalistic in practice using the measure Polsby employed. However, the subsequent dynamics of particular cases that were considered after Institutionalization was published raises the real possibility that contested election cases may once again take a more persistently partisan cast.

Committee seniority. In Institutionalization, Polsby measured the rise of seniority simply, as the percentage of committees in which the chair was the most senior majority party member of the committee.²⁴ By Polsby’s accounting, majority party seniority as the mechanism through which chairs were chosen witnesses two sea changes. The first occurred around the 1890s, and can be associated with the rise of the Reed Rules and what we have termed the “organizational cartel” that links together party unity in electing Speakers with an agreement to “spread the wealth” in committee assignments among the various factions of the majority party (Jenkins and Stewart 2013). The second major shift occurred around the passage of the 1946 LRA, when the sheer

²⁴ In reading Institutionalization carefully, it appears that Polsby largely just assumes that seniority involves the selection of the most senior *majority party* member of a committee. As we suggest in our recent analysis of the history of speakership elections (Jenkins and Stewart 2013), this is too important a point just to be assumed. However, for the sake of brevity we adopt this assumption in our analysis here.

number of committees plummeted and the practice of following seniority became virtually universal.²⁵

Polsby's core finding concerning the use of seniority in appointing committee chairs is reported in his Table 7 and Figure 5, which we update in Table 8 and Figure 10. In updating Polsby's analysis, we have not simply picked up the analysis after 1969, but have also taken advantage of subsequent research that has scoured the record thoroughly for evidence of committee appointments across time; thus, we are able to correct what appears to be an over-estimation by Polsby of the number of seniority violations in the last decades of the nineteenth century.²⁶

[Table 8 about here]

[Figure 10 about here]

We focus our initial discussion on Figure 10, which graphs the calculations reported in Table 8. (To maintain continuity with *Institutionalization*, we aggregate the rate of seniority violations by decade.) The gray dashed line reproduces the statistics as reported by Polsby. The solid black line reports comparable statistics using the more recent committee datasets. As noted above, Polsby reported seniority violation rates well above 50% for the period spanning the 47th to 56th Congresses (1881–1901).²⁷ With the longer time series stretching back to the 37th Congress (1861), we see that the rate of seniority violations hovered in the 20% range from the

²⁵ A full consideration of Polsby's analysis of the rise of seniority must include his companion piece on "The Growth of the Seniority System in the U.S. House of Representatives" (Polsby, Gallaher, and Rundquist 1969). That piece is important intellectually for distinguishing the rote application of seniority with the possibility that seniority violations might be "compensated" for a variety of reasons. (The analysis of compensated seniority violations is later taken up by Cox and McCubbins 1993.) For the present, we focus here on Polsby's initial analysis, leaving for future work the incorporation of the more nuanced analysis in the 1969 article.

²⁶ This research is reflected in Nelson (1993), Canon, Nelson, and Stewart (2002), and Nelson and Stewart (2010). In addition, some of this analysis was brought up to the present using the Stewart and Woon committee data file found at http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www/data_page.html.

²⁷ We have yet to get to the bottom of this discrepancy, but plan to in future drafts of this paper.

Civil War until the period that includes the transition to the post-LRA committee system.²⁸ The most notable exception was the 62nd–66th Congress period (1911–1921), which spans the transition to the “textbook Congress” committee system, in which the rate of seniority violations fell to 6.6% (using the new data).²⁹

Polsby was only able to report the rate of seniority violations for one full decade following the LRA (82nd–86th Congress, 1951–1961), when that rate fell to 0.7% by Polsby’s accounting and 3.2% using the more recent data. Picking up on the data that describes the reliance on pure seniority after the publication of Institutionalization, the decade of the 1960s also saw virtually no seniority violations in the naming of committee chairs. That rate took a dramatic shift upward in the 1970s, continuing into the 1980s and 1990s, reflecting the operation of the committee appointment reforms that passed in the House Democratic caucus in the 1970s, and the various revolts against certain chairs that resulted. The onset of term limits for Republican committee chairs first instituted in the 104th Congress is associated with a slight uptick in seniority violations in the 1990s (102nd–106th Congresses), but the rate began to skyrocket in the 2000s; across the past two Congresses, most House committee chairs have not been the most senior majority party member.³⁰

Figure 11 reports the rate of seniority violations by Congress since the 37th Congress. (The two dashed lines reflect the beginning of the period when committee assignments began to be made by Congress rather than by session [47th Congress; 1881], and the cut-off point of the Polsby analysis [88th Congress; 1963].) Note that the period of quasi-pure use of seniority to

²⁸ The LRA passed in the 79th Congress and was implemented in the 80th Congress. Thus, the period covered by data from the 77th–81st Congress primarily reflects the pre-LRA House. Below we show the time series by Congress, and this post-LRA discontinuity is quite pronounced.

²⁹ This is again another case in which our analysis, based on the newer datasets, diverges from Polsby.

³⁰ Unanalyzed here is a related phenomenon that we have noticed when we have informally examined the complete committee lists, which is that the overall seniority ranking often violates strict seniority, even after taking into account the term limits for chairs. We have made preliminary inquiries on Capitol Hill about why this practice has developed and have received no firm answers in reply, only acknowledgements that others have noticed this, too.

appoint chairs corresponded with the 81st Congress (1949), that is, the Congress in which Democrats regained control of the House following temporary Republican control of the House in the 80th Congress (1947).³¹ The reign of seniority was broken with the 93rd Congress (1973). Careful examination of Figure 11 reveals that, since the 104th Congress (1995), Republicans have been much more likely to violate strict seniority than Democrats.

[Figure 11 about here]

The sequential erosion of seniority as the rule to select committee chairs, first by the Democrats in the 1970s and then by the Republicans in the 1990s, is part of the larger well-known tale of the shifting locus of control in the House from the committees to the parties (or, alternatively, to the rank-and-file of the parties). In the words quoted earlier in this paper from Polsby's *Legislatures* essay, this tale usually focuses on *who* makes the mark on lawmaking in a legislature. The *Legislatures* essay suggests another question to be asked about this shift in the locus of legislative control, which is whether it has shifted the House away from being a transformative legislature to an arena? This is not to suggest that the House has slid all the way over to share continuum space with the British and Belgian Parliaments, just that the question needs to be considered about how far the House has moved.

The most likely answer to this question lies in a consideration of the House as being a collection of "work horses," contrasted with the Senate and its "show horses." By rewarding continued service on a committee at the *virtual* ignorance of other considerations, the seniority

³¹ Hinckley (1971) conducts an important, and now-often-overlooked, analysis of the important role that the sequence of elections spanning 1944, 1946, and 1948 had in the development of the seniority system in the House. It was especially important in setting in place the stylized fact about this period, which is that southern Democrats disproportionately benefitted from the operation of the seniority system. Hershey reminds us that the 79th Congress, which passed the LRA, which consolidated the committee system, had a Democratic majority. However, the 80th Congress had a Republican majority. Northern Democrats suffered disproportionate losses in the 1946 midterm elections, leaving southern Democrats to be the first to be appointed to committees under the LRA, and thus the most senior when northern Democrats regained their seats in the 81st Congress. We see in Figure 11 that it is this Congress that is the second in congressional history (after the 38th, in the midst of the Civil War) in which all House committee chairs were the most senior majority party members.

system as document by Polsby and others of his generation created a disincentive for House members to do anything other than focus on their committee work. At least for those who intended to spend more than a couple of terms in the chamber, House members were incentivized to find the committee that would best serve their own political goals, convince the respective committees on committees of the rightness of that fit, and then keep their head down and do their work. A wandering eye — either to other committees or to leadership — was not rewarded.

This is not to say that hard work on committees is no longer rewarded, but it becomes just one of several considerations that can lead to the eventual ascent to a committee chair. In that sense, seniority has become like it was in the nineteenth century House, just one factor among many. Aspiring committee chairs must now convince their co-partisans, including those who serve on other committees, that they are attuned to party goals. Sometimes these party goals require a mastery of the subject matter associated with a committee, for the purposes of drafting effective legislation. At other times, these party goals may be even better served by a committee chair who can effectively position take on behalf of the party's brand. If this is the mark of an Institutionalized House, it is not one that Polsby appears to have had in mind.

The comments in these last two paragraphs pertain primarily to Republicans, since they have held the House majority persistently over the past two decades, and therefore it is useful to start the discussion by equating “the House” with the “Republican-controlled House.” Whether Democrats would keep to the same path if they gained control of the House for the next two decades remains to be seen. (When they gained control following the 2006 election, they rolled back some, but not all, of the Republican changes of the Gingrich Revolution.) Because the Democratic Party is the party of activist government, it is imaginable that should Democrats regain control of the House for a long period of time, they would revert to the earlier system that

rewarded work-horse behavior in committees. On the other hand, the continued decline in public confidence about an activist federal government and the ability of Congress to legislate may push Democrats, too, to continue along the path that the Republicans have trod.

Contested elections. Polsby measured contested elections in terms of the number of House seats contested (or disputed) in five-Congress increments over time. Polsby provided anecdotal evidence — short accounts of cases and quotes from contemporaneous political actors — to suggest that contested elections were used in a particularistic fashion in the past, as a way to decide outcomes in a partisan (as opposed to a “meritorious”) fashion. In short, Polsby argued that the House majority party sometimes used the chamber’s constitutional authority (Article I, Section 5) to “flip” election outcomes to their benefit.

Polsby’s count of House election contests appears in Table 9 and Figure 12, which we update — both in terms of assembling data after the 88th Congress, as well as more thoroughly scouring various primary and secondary sources for evidence of contested elections for the period that Polsby covers.³² Polsby’s count and our count track each other reasonably well for most of the five-Congress periods. Differences exist in the 26th–30th and 36th–40th Congress periods; the former because of a presumed oversight on Polsby’s part (a single case affecting not just one seat, but 21 seats in four different states) and the latter because of how contests were counted in states no longer in the Union (Polsby counting them). Nonetheless, both series indicate a reduction in contested seats beginning around the turn of the twentieth century, and declining further in the ensuing decades. Our count in the five decades after Polsby indicate the virtual elimination of election contests altogether.

[Table 9 about here]

³² For a list of sources, see Jenkins (2004, *fn* 26). To those sources, we also add Whitaker (2011).

[Figure 12 about here]

Polsby interpreted the declining incidence of contested elections as evidence that “the practice of instigating contests for frivolous reasons has passed into history” (p. 163). Since the publication of Polsby’s Institutionalization article, the House in fact passed new legislation to make the dismissal of election contests easier. The Federal Contested Election Act of 1969 (Public Law 91-138, title II, 381 et seq.) was the first major update on contested election procedure since 1851. In enacting the FCEA, members sought a more efficient and expeditious process for resolving contested election cases. Among other things, the FCEA clarified who had standing to initiate a contest (primarily — but not exclusively — the contestant, or losing candidate in the election), outlined procedures for taking testimony, and established a framework for disposition of a case (Garber and Frank 1990).³³

Since the adoption of the FCEA, most cases have been “dismissed due to failure by the contestant to sustain the burden of proof necessary to overcome a motion to dismiss” (Whitaker 2011, p. 1) or “withdrawn by the contestant for various reasons” (Deschler-Brown-Johnson-Sullivan Precedents, Volume 18, p. 525). In only one case since the passage of the FCEA has the House ruled in favor of the contestant: *McCloskey v. McIntyre* (99th Congress, election to the 8th District of Indiana). In that case, the seating of Frank McCloskey (the Democratic contestant) over Richard McIntyre, the state-certified Republican winner, by the Democratic majority in the House generated significant partisan rancor in the chamber, and ultimately led to a walkout-protest by Republicans.

³³ Specifically, the framework involves the case being referred to the Committee on House Administration, which investigates the complaint and subsequently makes a recommendation to the chamber. A decision on the case is then made by the full House.

While Polsby stops short of providing more systematic evidence — beyond the raw counts of election contests over time — for a move to universalism in the twentieth century, he *does* lay out how the transition to a universalistic norm could be identified, specifically by:

measuring the extent to which party lines are breached ... in voting on the floor in contests cases. I have made no such study, but on the accumulated weight of contemporary reports such as I have been quoting, I predict that a time series would show strict party voting in the 19th century, switching to unanimity or near-unanimity, in most cases, from the early years of the 20th century onward. (p. 163)

We can explore Polsby's prediction by first identifying those election cases that were determined by roll call, and then assessing the degree to which partisanship was a factor in the outcome.³⁴ A first cut would be to gauge how many election-contest roll calls were in fact "party votes," or votes in which at least 50 percent of one major party opposed at least 50 percent of the other major party. Table 10 provides a summary total, as well as a cross-period breakdown. In fact, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of election-contest votes that can be characterized as party votes is quite high — nearly 80 percent — with roughly one-in-six being perfectly-aligned party votes (in which all voting members of one party oppose all voting members of the other party). And while these results represent a drop-off from the late-nineteenth century — when nearly 95 percent of roll calls were party votes, and more than one out of every five was a perfectly-aligned party vote — the reduction is relatively slight.

[Table 10 about here]

If universalism had indeed emerged as the new norm in the twentieth century, per Polsby, party lines should have (largely) broken down on election-contest votes in favor of unanimous (or near-unanimous) coalitions, and we thus should observe no (or few) votes that would be characterized as party votes. This is not the case. And, the evidence for a new twentieth century

³⁴ This analysis is based on and extends Jenkins (2004).

norm of universalism is even less compelling when we examine individual-level votes on election-contest roll calls. In the late-nineteenth century, 92.7 percent of individual votes were correctly classified by a simple party model.³⁵ Since the beginning of the twentieth century, that percentage has actually *increased*: 93.5 percent of individual votes are correctly classified by a simple party model.³⁶

The preceding analysis considers particularism (partisanship) and universalism in the context of roll-call votes. However, not all election contests have been decided by roll call. Thus, we consider the distribution of cases that elicited roll calls. Table 11 provides a breakdown, both generally and across the three time periods from Table 10. Overall, less than one-third of all contested election cases have been decided by roll call, with the remaining cases dealt with by voice vote or by the House taking no action (and thereby accepting the outcome from the initial election). The cross-period distribution reveals an interesting pattern: the percent of cases determined by roll call was reasonably high prior to the twentieth century, but has dropped off considerably since then. In fact, since the beginning of the twentieth century, it would not be a stretch to characterize an election contest decided by roll call as something of a “rare event” — only about one-in-eight have elicited a roll-call vote. These results suggest that the disposition of contested election cases has become more programmatic in recent years.

[Table 11 about here]

Thus, while partisanship is still a driving force in election-contest roll calls, the proportion of election contests that elicits a roll call has declined significantly since the turn of the twentieth century. The latter fact may provide some indirect support for a universalistic story. However, we caution against arguing too strongly that the reduction in the proportion of roll calls

³⁵ In terms of methodology, the party model is a basic logistic regression, where an individual roll-call vote is regressed on a member’s party affiliation.

³⁶ See Jenkins (2004, Table 7, p. 124).

is an indication that the contested election process has become less partisan over time. A number of cases since the beginning of the twentieth century have been highly partisan, but still resolved in the end by a voice vote.³⁷ The move to more programmatic disposition of contested election cases, for example, could simply be a function of the changing costs and benefits attributed to election contests by partisan decision makers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These issues deserve additional investigation. Moreover, it seems to us quite plausible in today's highly polarized House that contested elections could once again take on an overtly partisan cast — especially if partisan seat divisions in the chamber remain close and flipping election outcomes could be important for assembling an effective partisan governing coalition.

III. Discussion

This paper has revisited an argument and accompanying empirical evidence that Nelson Polsby adduced to illustrate the institutionalization of the House of Representatives. In doing so, we are impressed yet again with the range of scholarship Polsby brought to bear on the question. His original article not only alerted the discipline to how the House had been transformed across its long history, but placed those changes within the broader literature on the functioning of legislatures in democratic institutions. It was impressive, not only for its time, but for any time.

The first topic to cover in discussing this paper is simply the narrow conclusions we draw from an examination of the updated time series. The first point to make is that the House is still clearly on the “institutionalized” side of the scale of legislatures. Even to the degree there has been backsliding — and there has been at least a little backsliding on most of the measures — the current House is currently much more like the House that Polsby analyzed than the House of the antebellum period.

³⁷ The *Kunz v. Granata* case, in the 72nd Congress (1931), is one example. See Jenkins (2004, pp. 119-20).

Still, the backsliding needs to be acknowledged. Of course, Polsby understood that the path of institutionalization was not unidirectional. Still, it is bracing to reveal that the institutional capacity of the House has taken a step back from most of the characteristics that described in the House in the 1960s. House careers no longer are getting longer and longer; instead, Democratic careers have gotten a little longer while Republican careers have plateaued. The committee system has been scaled back, both in terms of the number of committees and the resources given to them for the operation. The road to the speakership is more varied; the specialization of committee functions and leadership functions has been blurred.

Taking a note from Polsby's "Legislatures" essay, it is natural to suspect that the House in this time has migrated from the firm extreme of the "transformative legislature" pole toward the "arena" pole. Considering the House in comparative perspective, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the House has become a full-fledged arena legislature. However, this is not escaping the conclusion that fewer institutional resources and incentives are now devoted to the development of subject-matter expertise in the House, while at the same time more resources and incentives have been shifted toward the parties and their drives to facilitate branding the partisan legislative product and to play more of an "outside game."

In our discussion in Section I, we noted that Polsby's Institutionalization article was part of a congressional literature that was steeped in sociological organization theory. Within that intellectual paradigm, it was easier to address normative topics like institutional performance and functionality. Almost as soon as the ink was dry on the printing of Institutionalization the theoretical focus of congressional studies turned to that of the purposive actor and more positive (i.e., empirical) intellectual goals. The rational choice paradigm provides powerful tools to help us understand the behavior of individuals from the perspective of their political goals, but it is

not clear that it provides equally compelling insights into normative questions about the collective performance of the House within the American political system.

We hope that by focusing the profession's attention back onto Polby's classic article we can encourage a reconsideration of how our theoretical perspectives serve to provide insights into the collective output of Congress. We are not saying that rational choice perspectives on legislatures are worthless in this regard (far from it!), only that they have not been put to good use in helping us measure the degree to which Congress functions as a positive contributor to governmental outputs. As modern students of Congress grapple with the broad popular consensus that Congress is no longer a particularly effective legislature, Polsby provides an apt model for how theory can provide an effective path that marries empirical analysis of Congress with a strong normative judgment about its contribution to the common good.

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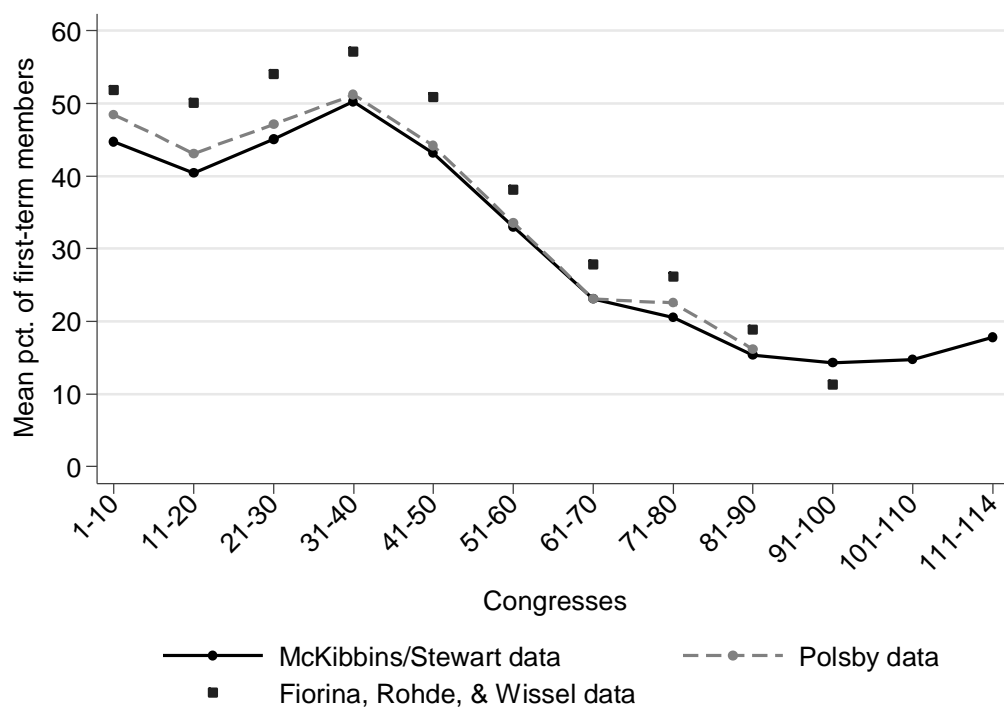
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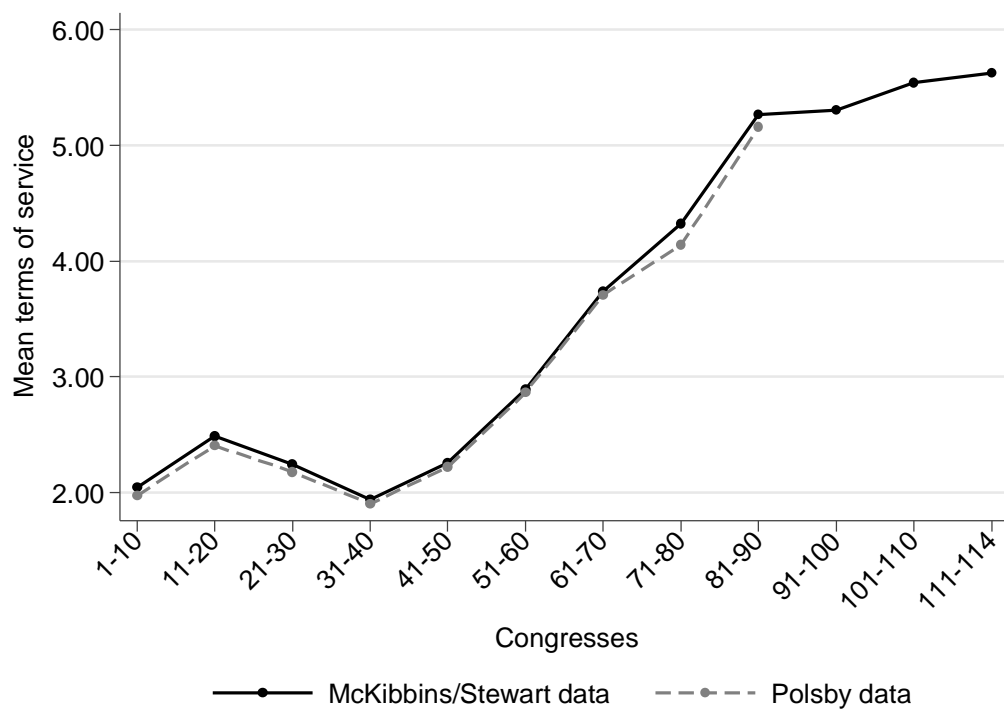
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Figure 1. Decline in percentage of first term members, U.S. House of Representatives, 1789–2015.



Sources: McKibbin/Stewart data from Table 1; Polsby data from Polsby (1968); Fiorina, Rohde, and Wissel (1975).

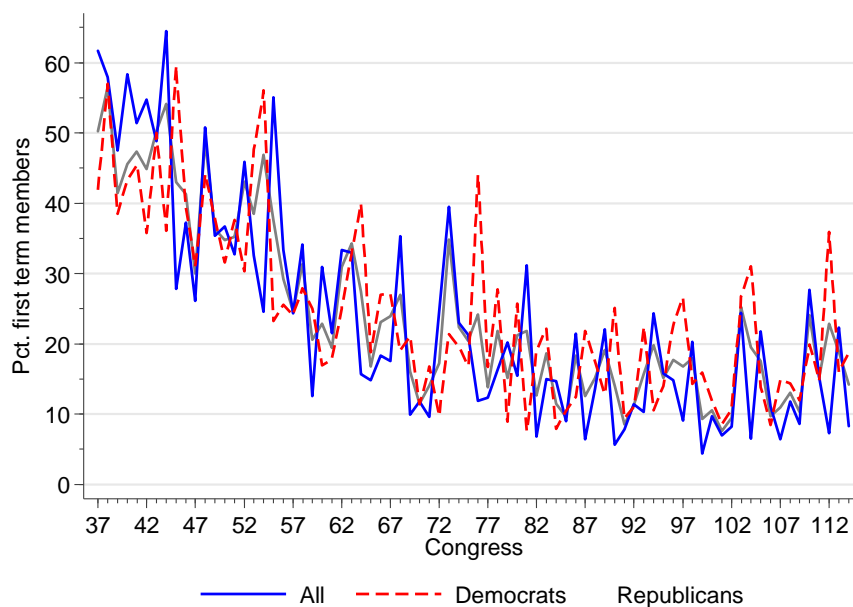
Figure 2. Increase in terms served by incumbent members of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789–2015.



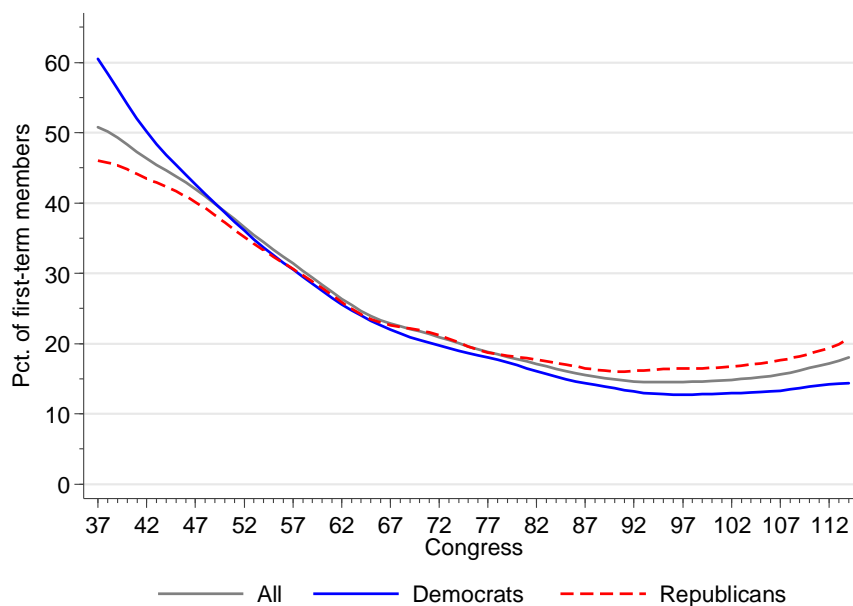
Source: Data from Table 2

Figure 3. Decline in percentage of first term members, U.S. House of Representatives, by party, 1861–2015.

a. Raw data



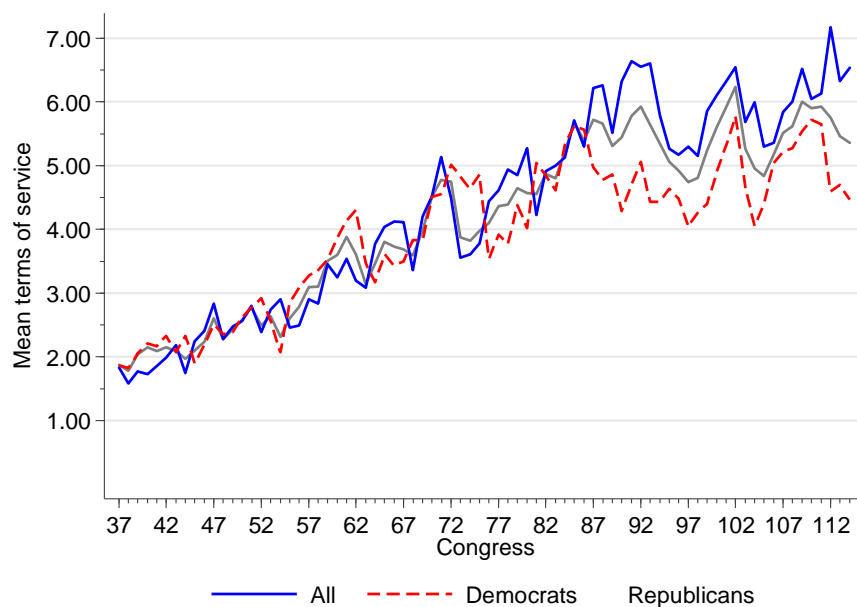
b. (Lowess smoothing)



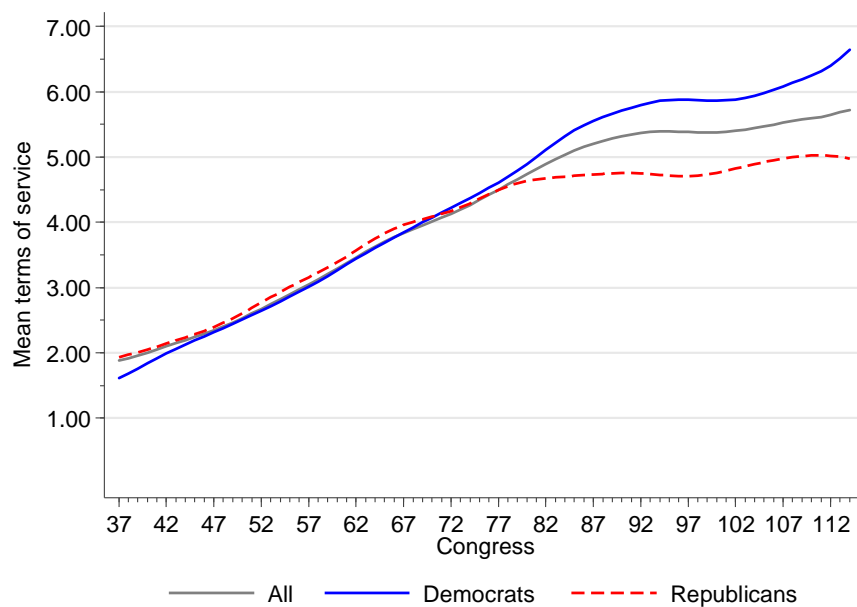
Source: ICPSR (1997) and data gathered by the authors.

Figure 4. Increase in terms served by incumbent members of the U.S. House of Representatives, by party, 1861–2015.

a. Raw data



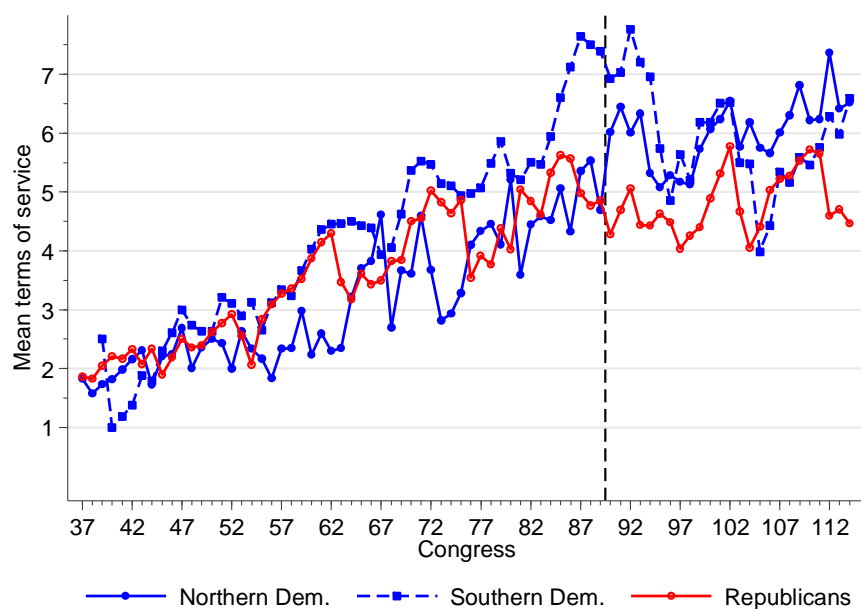
b. Lowess smoothing



Source: ICPSR (1997) and data gathered by the authors.

Figure 5. Increase in terms served by incumbent members of the U.S. House of Representatives, by party and region, 1861–2015

a. Raw data



b. Lowess smoothing

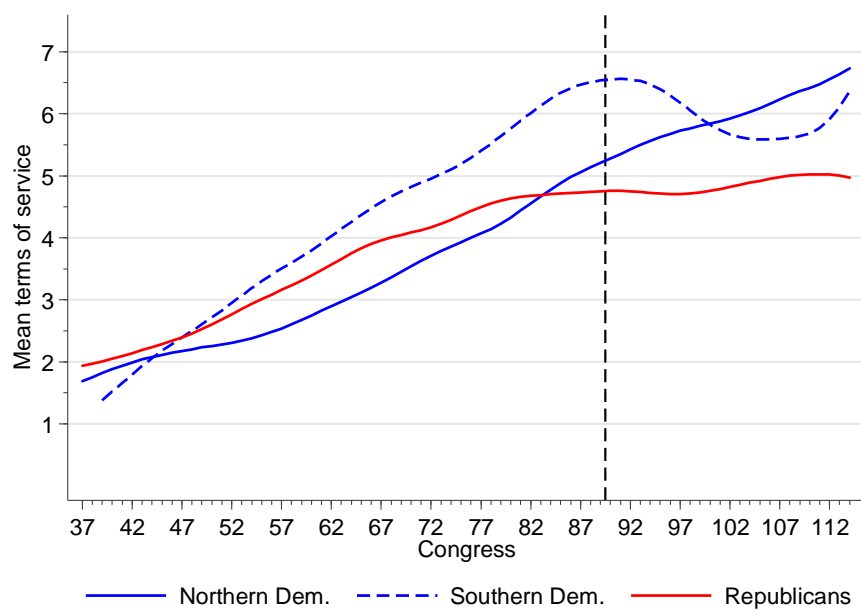


Figure 6. Mean years served in Congress before first becoming Speaker by 20-year intervals. (Update of Polsby 1968, Figure 3).

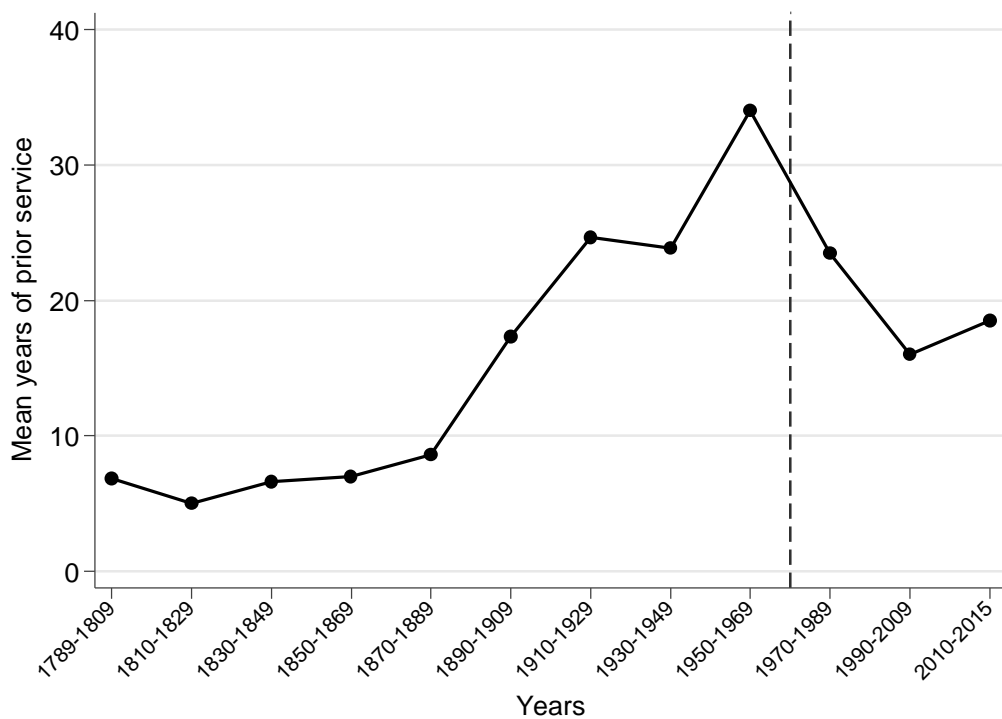


Figure 7. Average elapsed years between last day of House service and death

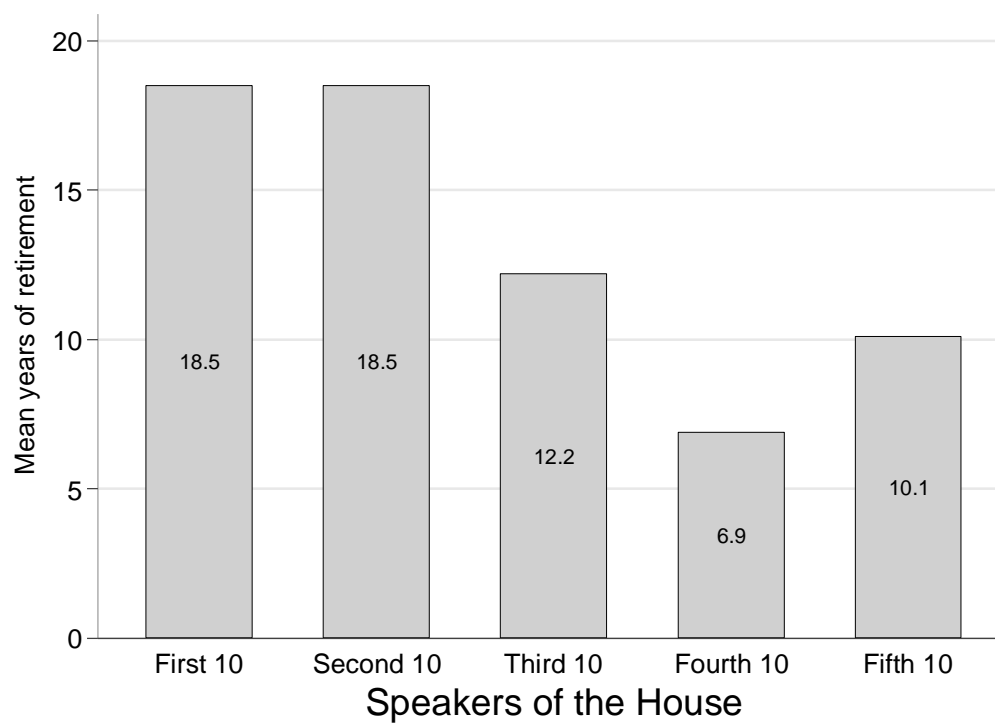
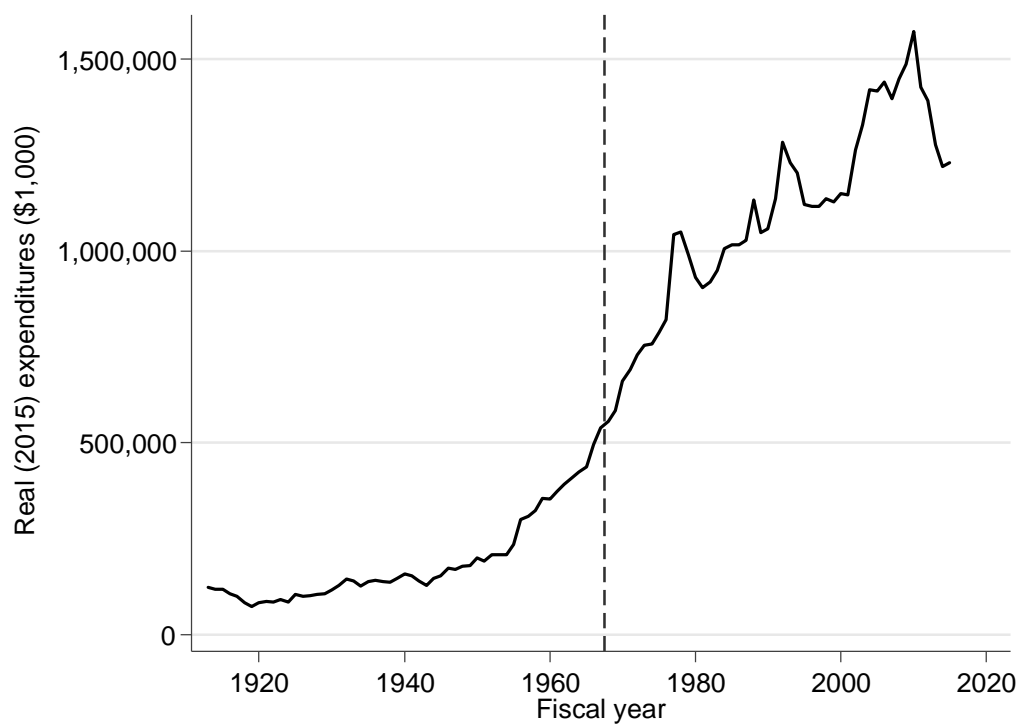
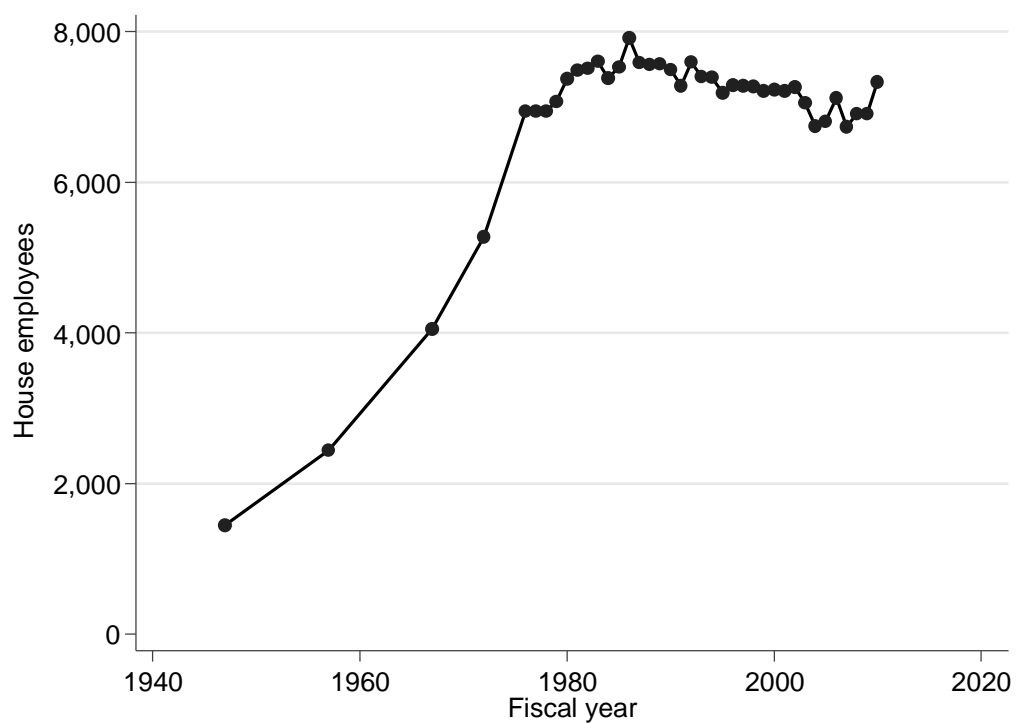


Figure 8. Real expenditures by the House of Representatives, FY 1940–2021 (est.)



Source: Polsby (1968, Table 6) and Budget of the United States, Historic Tables.

Figure 9. Personnel employed by the House of Representatives, 1947–2010



Source: **Vital statistics on Congress**

Figure 10. Decline in violations of seniority, committee chairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 1861–2013

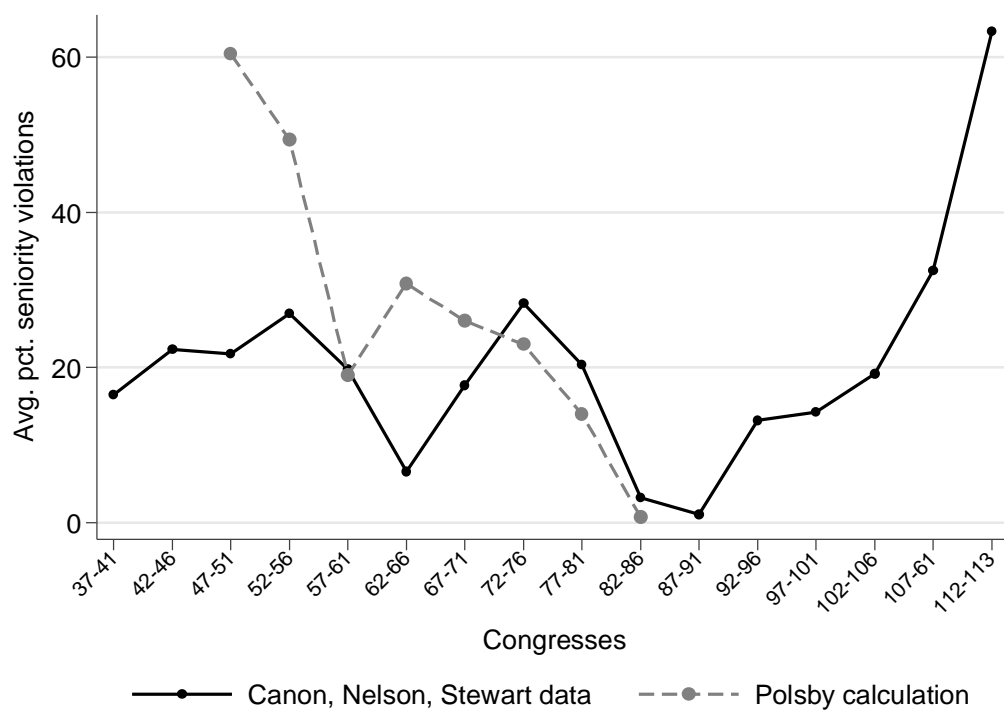


Figure 11. Figure 8 data by Congress

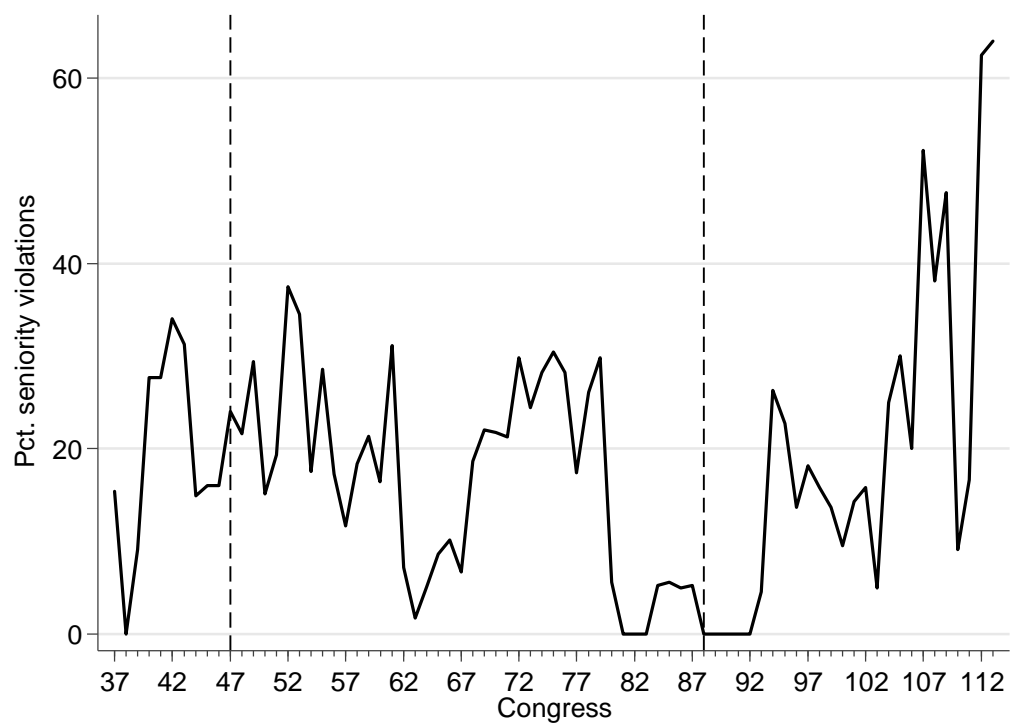


Figure 12. Contested elections in the House by decades, 1789–2010

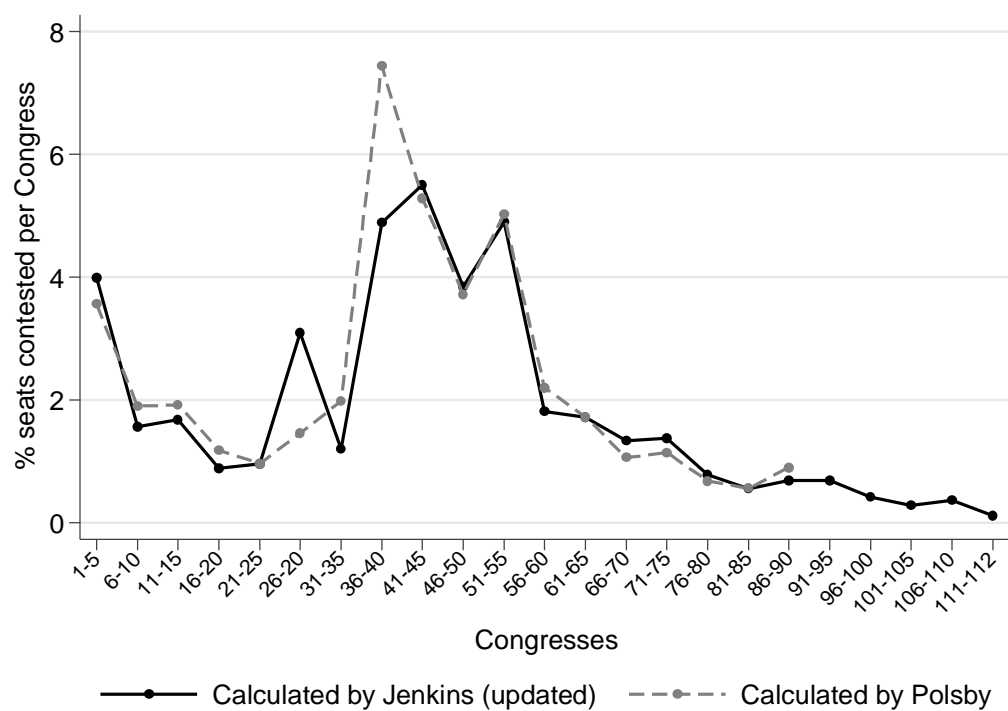


Table 1. Decline in percentage of first term members, U.S. House of Representatives, 1789–2015. (Update of Polsby 1968, Table 1.)

Congress	Year of 1st term	% 1st term members	Congress	Year of 1st term	% 1st term members	Congress	Year of 1st term	% 1st term members
1	1789	100.0	39	1865	41.5	77	1941	13.8
2	1791	43.3	40	1867	45.5	78	1943	21.8
3	1793	54.3	41	1869	47.3	79	1945	15.2
4	1795	34.6	42	1871	44.9	80	1947	21.2
5	1797	36.8	43	1873	50.3	81	1949	21.8
6	1799	32.1	44	1875	54.1	82	1951	12.6
7	1801	37.4	45	1877	43.0	83	1953	18.6
8	1803	44.7	46	1879	41.3	84	1955	11.5
9	1805	33.1	47	1881	30.0	85	1957	9.7
10	1807	31.0	48	1883	48.9	86	1959	18.3
11	1809	30.3	49	1885	36.3	87	1961	12.6
12	1811	38.5	50	1887	34.8	88	1963	15.2
13	1813	48.9	51	1889	35.2	89	1965	19.1
14	1815	39.8	52	1891	43.1	90	1967	14.0
15	1817	56.5	53	1893	38.5	91	1969	8.5
16	1819	40.2	54	1895	46.9	92	1971	11.3
17	1821	44.9	55	1897	37.5	93	1973	15.7
18	1823	39.0	56	1899	29.2	94	1975	19.8
19	1825	34.7	57	1901	24.6	95	1977	15.2
20	1827	31.1	58	1903	31.3	96	1979	17.7
21	1829	39.9	59	1905	20.6	97	1981	16.8
22	1831	38.0	60	1907	22.9	98	1983	18.0
23	1833	48.5	61	1909	19.4	99	1985	9.3
24	1835	35.7	62	1911	31.0	100	1987	10.6
25	1837	45.4	63	1913	34.3	101	1989	7.6
26	1839	43.6	64	1915	27.4	102	1991	9.4
27	1841	36.8	65	1917	16.8	103	1993	25.3
28	1843	66.4	66	1919	23.1	104	1995	19.5
29	1845	47.3	67	1921	23.9	105	1997	17.6
30	1847	49.1	68	1923	27.0	106	1999	9.7
31	1849	51.3	69	1925	16.1	107	2001	10.9
32	1851	51.9	70	1927	11.5	108	2003	13.1
33	1853	59.7	71	1929	14.0	109	2005	10.3
34	1855	57.1	72	1931	17.2	110	2007	24.1
35	1857	44.3	73	1933	34.9	111	2009	15.2
36	1859	44.5	74	1935	22.4	112	2011	22.8
37	1861	50.3	75	1937	20.5	113	2013	18.9
38	1863	56.5	76	1939	24.1	114	2015	14.2

Source: ICPSR (1997) and data gathered by the authors.

Table 2. Increase in terms served by incumbent members of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789–2015. (Update of Polsby 1968, Table 2)

Congress	Beginning term	Mean terms of service	Congress	Beginning term	Mean terms of service	Congress	Beginning term	Mean terms of service
1	1789	1.00	39	1865	2.04	77	1941	4.36
2	1791	1.57	40	1867	2.15	78	1943	4.39
3	1793	1.67	41	1869	2.09	79	1945	4.65
4	1795	2.10	42	1871	2.15	80	1947	4.57
5	1797	2.16	43	1873	2.09	81	1949	4.55
6	1799	2.30	44	1875	1.97	82	1951	4.87
7	1801	2.34	45	1877	2.10	83	1953	4.80
8	1803	2.18	46	1879	2.24	84	1955	5.22
9	1805	2.46	47	1881	2.60	85	1957	5.67
10	1807	2.68	48	1883	2.28	86	1959	5.39
11	1809	2.89	49	1885	2.43	87	1961	5.72
12	1811	2.90	50	1887	2.58	88	1963	5.66
13	1813	2.45	51	1889	2.78	89	1965	5.30
14	1815	2.60	52	1891	2.50	90	1967	5.44
15	1817	1.99	53	1893	2.64	91	1969	5.78
16	1819	2.16	54	1895	2.31	92	1971	5.93
17	1821	2.21	55	1897	2.61	93	1973	5.64
18	1823	2.32	56	1899	2.79	94	1975	5.34
19	1825	2.56	57	1901	3.10	95	1977	5.06
20	1827	2.76	58	1903	3.10	96	1979	4.92
21	1829	2.59	59	1905	3.50	97	1981	4.74
22	1831	2.61	60	1907	3.60	98	1983	4.81
23	1833	2.34	61	1909	3.88	99	1985	5.24
24	1835	2.33	62	1911	3.61	100	1987	5.61
25	1837	2.22	63	1913	3.14	101	1989	5.91
26	1839	2.23	64	1915	3.47	102	1991	6.23
27	1841	2.34	65	1917	3.81	103	1993	5.26
28	1843	1.78	66	1919	3.73	104	1995	4.95
29	1845	1.93	67	1921	3.69	105	1997	4.83
30	1847	2.03	68	1923	3.59	106	1999	5.18
31	1849	2.00	69	1925	3.98	107	2001	5.51
32	1851	1.85	70	1927	4.51	108	2003	5.62
33	1853	1.72	71	1929	4.77	109	2005	6.00
34	1855	1.83	72	1931	4.75	110	2007	5.90
35	1857	2.10	73	1933	3.88	111	2009	5.93
36	1859	2.04	74	1935	3.83	112	2011	5.76
37	1861	1.87	75	1937	3.98	113	2013	5.46
38	1863	1.78	76	1939	4.09	114	2015	5.36

Table 3. Years served in Congress before first selection as Speaker, 1971–2015. (Update of Polsby 1968, Table 3.)

Date of selection	Speaker	Years
1971	Albert	24
1977	O’Neil	14
1987	Wright	32
1989	Foley	24
1995	Gingrich	16
1999	Hastert	12
2007	Pelosi	20
2011	Boehner	20
2015	Ryan	17

Table 4. Summary of years served in Congress before first selection as Speaker. (Update of Polsby 1968, Table 4).

	Before 1899	1899–1971	1971 and after
8 years or less	25	0	0
9–14 years	8	0	2
15–20 years	0	2	4
21–32 years	0	10	3
	33 Speakers	12 Speakers	9 Speakers

Table 5. Previous formal House leadership positions held by Speakers selected in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Speaker	Party	Year first elected	Party leader	Whip	Committee leadership
Cannon	R	1903	—	—	HAC Chair
Clark	D	1911	Min. leader	—	WAM Ranking/Rules Ranking
Gillett	R	1919	—	—	HAC Ranking
Longworth	R	1925	Maj. leader	—	—
Garner	D	1931	Min. leader	—	WAM Ranking
Rainey	D	1933	Maj. leader	—	—
Byrns	D	1935	Maj. leader	—	HAC Chair
Bankhead	D	1936	Maj. leader	—	Rules Chair
Rayburn	D	1940	Maj. leader	—	Commerce Chair
Martin	R	1946	Min. leader	—	Rules Ranking
McCormack	D	1962	Maj. leader	Min. whip	—
Albert	D	1971	Maj. leader	Maj. whip	—
O'Neil	D	1977	Maj. leader	Maj. whip	—
Wright	D	1987	Maj. leader	—	—
Foley	D	1989	Maj. leader	Maj. whip	Agriculture Chair
Gingrich	R	1995	—	Min. whip	House Admin. Ranking
Hastert	R	1999	—	—	—
Pelosi	D	2007	Min. leader	Min. whip	—
Boehner	R	2011	Maj./min. leader	—	Ed. & Workforce Chair
Ryan	R	2015	—	—	Budget Ranking/Chair

Source: Canon, Nelson, and Stewart (2002); Nelson (1993); Nelson and Stewart (2010).

Table 6. Post-congressional fate of Speakers. (Update of Polsby 1968, Table 5).

Speaker (term)	Elapsed years between last day of service as Representative and death	How Speakers finished their careers
45. McCormack (1962–71)	9	Private life
46. Albert (1971-1977)	23	Private life
47. O'Neil (1977-1987)	7	Private life
48. Wright (1987-1989)	26	Private life
49. Foley (1989-1995)	18	Private life; Ambassador to Japan
50. Gingrich (1995-1999)	N/A	Private life; presidential candidate
51. Hastert (1999-2007)	N/A	Private life; lobbyist
52. Pelosi (2007-2011)	N/A	Currently in House of Representatives
53. Boehner (2011-2015)	N/A	Private life
54. Ryan (2015–present)	N/A	Currently Speaker

Table 7. Expenditures made by the House of Representatives. (Update of Polsby 1968, Table 6.)

Fiscal Year	Nominal Expenditures (\$1000s)	Real Expenditures (\$1000s, \$2009)	Fiscal Year	Nominal Expenditures (\$1000s)	Real Expenditures (\$1000s, \$2009)
1967	76,006	538,414	1992	761,068	1,283,455
1968	81,833	556,370	1993	751,288	1,230,137
1969	90,564	583,854	1994	753,405	1,202,804
1970	108,279	660,279	1995	723,000	1,122,453
1971	118,204	690,545	1996	741,000	1,117,403
1972	128,830	729,215	1997	757,000	1,115,926
1973	141,648	754,818	1998	783,000	1,136,551
1974	158,093	758,718	1999	795,000	1,129,034
1975	178,988	787,148	2000	837,000	1,150,024
1976	197,525	821,343	2001	858,000	1,146,261
1977	267,015	1,042,504	2002	961,000	1,263,883
1978	289,245	1,049,622	2003	1,033,000	1,328,303
1979	303,721	989,813	2004	1,134,000	1,420,352
1980	324,569	931,954	2005	1,170,000	1,417,419
1981	347,721	905,069	2006	1,227,000	1,440,021
1982	375,241	920,021	2007	1,224,000	1,397,001
1983	399,800	949,726	2008	1,319,000	1,449,491
1984	442,414	1,007,461	2009	1,349,000	1,487,988
1985	462,677	1,017,373	2010	1,449,000	1,571,909
1986	470,741	1,016,216	2011	1,357,000	1,427,595
1987	493,604	1,028,052	2012	1,351,000	1,392,189
1988	567,102	1,134,204	2013	1,257,000	1,276,421
1989	549,127	1,047,770	2014	1,220,000	1,219,485
1990	585,073	1,059,130	2015	1,231,000	1,231,000
1991	654,857	1,137,586			

Table 8. Violations of seniority in the appointment of committee chairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 1861–2013

Congresses	Years	Avg. violations		Congresses	Years	Avg. violations	
		Polsby data	Canon, Nelson, & Stewart data			Polsby data	Canon, Nelson, & Stewart data
37-41	1861–69	—	16.5%	77-81	1941–49	14.0%	20.3%
42-46	1871–79	—	22.3%	82-86	1951–59	0.7%	3.2%
47-51	1881–89	60.4%	21.8%	87-91	1961–69	—	1.1%
52-56	1891–99	49.4%	27.0%	92-96	1971–79	—	13.2%
57-61	1901–09	19.0%	19.8%	97-101	1981–89	—	14.3%
62-66	1911–19	30.8%	6.6%	102-106	1991–99	—	19.2%
67-71	1921–29	26.0%	17.7%	107-111	2001–09	—	32.4%
72-76	1931–39	23.0%	28.3%	112-113	2011–13	—	63.3%

Table 9. Contested elections in the House by decades, 1789–2010

Congress	Calculated by Polsby			Calculated by Jenkins (updated)		
	Number of contested seats	Mean seats in House for decade	% seats contested per Congress	Number of contested seats	Mean seats in House for decade	% seats contested per Congress
1–5 (1789–1798)	16	89.8	3.56	18	90.2	3.99
6–10 (1799–1808)	12	126.6	1.90	10	127.8	1.56
11–15 (1809–1818)	16	166.4	1.92	14	167.0	1.68
16–20 (1819–1828)	12	202.6	1.18	9	202.4	0.89
21–25 (1829–1838)	11	230.0	0.96	11	230.0	0.96
26–30 (1839–1848)	17	231.8	1.46	36	233.0	3.09
31–35 (1849–1858)	23	233.0	1.98	14	234.2	1.20
36–40 (1859–1868)	73	196.4	7.44	50	204.8	4.88
41–45 (1869–1878)	72	273.0	5.28	75	272.8	5.50
46–50 (1879–1888)	58	312.2	3.72	60	312.2	3.84
51–55 (1889–1898)	87	346.8	5.02	85	346.8	4.90
56–60 (1899–1908)	41	374.4	2.20	34	375.4	1.81
61–65 (1909–1918)	36	417.4	1.72	36	418.0	1.72
66–70 (1919–1928)	23	435.0	1.06	29	435.0	1.33
71–75 (1929–1938)	25	435.0	1.14	30	435.0	1.38
76–80 (1939–1948)	15	435.0	0.68	17	435.0	0.78
81–85 (1949–1958)	12	435.0	0.56	12	435.0	0.55
86–90 (1959–1968)*	8	437.0	0.90	15	435.8	0.69
91–95 (1969–1978)	—	—	—	15	435.0	0.69
96–100 (1979–1988)	—	—	—	9	435.0	0.42
101–105 (1989–1998)	—	—	—	6	435.0	0.28
106–110 (1999–2008)	—	—	—	8	435.0	0.37
111–112 (2009–2012)	—	—	—	1	435.0	0.11

*86th–88th Congresses (1959–1964) for Polsby

Source: Polsby (1968); Jenkins (2004), 108th through 112th updated by authors.

Table 10. Percentage of House election contest roll calls classified as party votes, by era

	All Congresses	Antebellum Period	Late 19th Century	20th and 21st Centuries
Percent Party Votes	87.0	76.9	94.6	79.3
Percent Perfectly- Aligned Party Votes	17.1	9.6	20.7	17.2
Total Roll Calls	192	52	111	29

Source: Jenkins (2004).

Table 11. Percentage of House election contests decided by roll-call vote, by era

	All Congresses	Antebellum Period	Late 19th Century	20th and 21st Centuries
Percent	31.5	48.6	39.4	13.1
Total Cases	610	107	282	221

Source: Jenkins (2004); first and last columns updated by authors.